

A Lie to Lay
with the Lord

LISA CAMPBELL

ALie to Lay with the Lord

He found what he was searching for when he stopped looking...

Lisa Campell

Contents

Thank you
Wicked and Wanton in London
About the book

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25

Epilogue
Extended Epilogue
Afterword
Wicked and Wanton in London
Do you want more Romance?
Lord of All Pleasures

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Thank you
About the Author

Thank you

I want to personally thank you for purchasing my book. It really means a lot to me. It's a blessing to have the opportunity to share with you, my passion for writing, through my stories.

As a **FREE GIFT**, I am giving you a link to my first novel. It has **a few reviews**, with an **average rating of 5 out of 5**.

It is called "[The Earl's Sinful Quest](#)", and you can get it for FREE.

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Wicked and Wanton in London

Book#1

A Bet to Wed the Duke



Book#2 (this book)

A Lie to Lay with the Lord

About the book



Her lips may lie but her actions will always speak the truth.

Lady Matilda Wynter is the most eccentric of ladies. Being a powerful duke's daughter means that **she knows what she wants and how to acquire it.**

Except for the man that owns her heart for years.

Lord Henry Linfield **is the talk of the ton**, and with good reason. As the banns for his upcoming wedding are read, a mysterious woman

claims that he is already married.

What a perfect scandal to ruin his family's name!

With **his fortune on the line** and his **sister's upcoming debut**, Henry must do something to fix this chaos.

So, in his hour of need, he **will seek the help** of his childhood friend, Matilda. A **marriage arrangement** between them seems **the best solution**.

But, as his feelings for his wife grow, Henry starts searching for the woman who tried to destroy his life. What if she strikes again and puts Matilda's reputation in jeopardy?

If only he knew who this lady was and what she wanted...

He found what he was searching for when he stopped looking...



Chapter One

I am so nervous I can barely think. Soon, I shall be a real lady of society! If he comes tonight, I don't know what I shall do...My heart belongs and will always belong to Henry Linfield. I cannot wait for the opportunity to dance with him tonight. It's been two years since I have seen him. Will he even recognise me in my new gown? Will he ask for my first dance? Will he ask to walk on the terrace with me under the moonlight? I don't even really care about coming out this season! Not really, I know I want Mama and father to be proud of me but the idea of being the centre of attention all night is disconcerting. But I'll put up with it to be with Henry. I would do anything for him.

"Tilly! Tilly, come and play with me!"

Matilda sighed and looked up from her diary, closing the worn leather book on the section she had been re-reading from two years ago. Her younger brother barrelled into the room, a whirl of red hair and long limbs.

"Careful, Barty!" Matilda scolded, catching her seven-year-old brother's arms to stop him from knocking something over. He was in the middle of a growth spurt, and was prone to not realising the length of his arms.

"Are you writing in your diary?" Barty's brown eyes fixed on the red leather notebook with eager curiosity. "Can I see?"

"You know you can't." Matilda quickly slipped the book into the drawer, deftly locking it with a key she kept around her neck. Ever since her father had gifted her the journal on the night of her first ball two years ago, Barty had been trying his hardest to have a peek into it. "Come on, what shall we play?" Matilda asked him, trying to distract her nosy little brother.

"I have a new set of jacks that Holton gave me." Barty bit his lip, thinking hard. "Or we could play cricket?"

"Boring," Matilda teased, rolling her eyes. "What about...polo?"

"Really?" Barty's eyes lit up and he jumped up and down. "Yes please! Let's go!"

Matilda took his hand and ran down the stairs, the two of them laughing as they raced along.

"Matilda!"

They stopped in the hallway, turning to see Mrs Bury poking her head out from behind the parlour door. She had served the Duke of Sinclair and the Wynter family for so long and had been Matilda's only mother figure in the intervening years between her mother's death and her father's second marriage. Matilda couldn't help but responding obediently.

"Yes, Mrs Bury?" she called. "Little Lord Wynter and I are going riding."

"You are expecting a suitor, remember?" Mrs Bury shook her head. "Honestly, Miss Wynter, you cannot avoid every gentleman your father suggests!"

"She can try, right Tilly?" Barty quipped, grinning up at his big sister as he parroted her usual phrase back to her. Matilda cuffed him gently on the back of the head.

"Hush you," she said fondly. "But yes, Mrs Bury, you can tell my father that I have a much more pressing engagement with a future Duke, that should make him happy."

"I imagine it shall make him less happy when he learns the Dukedom in question is his own," said a lilting, laughing voice in the parlour. Frances appeared, smiling languidly as she leaned against the door frame in a beautiful gown. She was not yet thirty years old and still held onto that beautiful plume of youth, despite mothering a wild girl through her adolescence and now an even wilder son. Matilda had always loved growing up with a beautiful young stepmother, she had always been the envy of all her friends and Frances had been the jewel

of society as the young woman who managed to catch the Duke of Sinclair, a man ten years her senior.

Now, as Matilda had reached adulthood, she had lived with Frances as her mother nearly as long as her birth mother and had quickly adjusted to calling her “Mama,” happy in the maternal bond they shared. She couldn’t wish anything to be different -- Frances had made her father so happy and their family complete. Yet Matilda couldn’t help but feel the squeezing pressure of expectation for in reality there were only eight years between them. Consequently, Frances had always been a very current example of how to be an ornament to society; her courtship of Matilda’s father was the stuff of legends among debutantes. Though Frances had never been anything but encouraging of Matilda’s journey and the most supportive mother she could be, but Matilda had already been out for two seasons and she knew the truth deep in her heart: she could never achieve the same heights of glory as her Mama. How could she ever compare to the elegant woman who stood before her? So radiant with her hair that matched Barty’s, that same red shine of autumn leaves, and her unique, arresting eyes.

“Like a leopard,” her father used to whisper to Matilda whenever Frances was enraged, and her eyes glowed dangerously. “Like a hunting cat, watch out!”

Frances’ eyes held none of their furious fire now. She looked at her children with an indulgent smile, her arms folded across her chest and her reddish-brown eyebrows raised in amusement. Matilda knew she had room to wiggle in when Frances was wearing that smile.

“Come on, Mama.” Matilda rolled her eyes. “This gentleman is nearly forty!”

“And a Viscount,” Frances grinned, “and one of your father’s close acquaintances...”

“I’m half his age!” Matilda exclaimed.

“Oh, is there something wrong with that?” Frances laughed. “Don’t forget how many years lie between your father and I.”

“Ten,” Barty said promptly. He had been told the tale of his parents’ courtship many times. It was one of his favourite bedtime stories.

“And Mama says it is what is inside a person’s heart that counts.”

“I do, indeed.” Frances laughed at her son, reaching forward to pet his head affectionately.

“Yes, well, ten is not twenty,” Matilda rebuked them both. “And I sincerely doubt the viscount is coming to court me on account of what he has heard of my *heart*.”

“For shame, Miss,” Mrs Bury tutted. “You shouldn’t talk so in front of Milord.”

“Talk about what?” Barty asked, looking between them.

“Oh, so we should lie to Barty should we?” Matilda raised her eyebrows as she stared between her two mother figures. “We should tell him that a gentleman twenty years my senior was enticed to court an eighteen-year-old on account of her *personality* alone?”

“I doubt it were that,” Barty piped up, wrinkling his nose. “People say you’re odd, Tilly.”

“Barty!” Frances scolded. “Don’t say such things about your sister.”

“I like it,” Barty pulled on Matilda’s arm affectionately. “She’s not silly and boring like other girls, she’s fun and adventurous and ex — ex —,”

Barty’s face was scrunched up as he tried to remember the right word and Matilda laughed, taking pity on her brother.

“I think ‘eccentric’ is the word you are looking for.” She smiled, poking her little brother’s nose. “And that is the word that society uses to describe pretty women who are not married or courting.”

“Is that why the gentleman is coming?” Barty asked his mother, turning to face her. “Because he thinks Tilly is pretty?”

Matilda bit her lip in amusement, raising her eyebrows at Frances who rolled her eyes in frustration and sighed.

“Yes! Lord give me strength.” She threw her hands up and looked up

to the heavens as she often did when she was pressed by both of her children at the same time. "It is because she is very pretty, Barty, but also because she has a very prominent title and making a match with a lady of fortune and circumstance is appealing to a man."

"But it's not her fortune, it's mine." Barty frowned. "That's what Tilly told me."

"What?" Frances exclaimed, rounding on Matilda. "What did you tell him?"

"I merely explained that women are property in this world, and when they marry their status is transferred from the father or brother to their husband," Matilda said innocently, watching in amusement as Mrs Bury crossed herself again and muttered under her breath about the things women should and shouldn't talk about.

"Which means Tilly belongs to me, because I'm the heir and I'll be the Duke one day and have all the money and the titles, so I'm keeping her," Barty said, wrapping his arms around his big sister's waist. "I decide that she stays here! Forever!"

Matilda grinned and looked up at Frances, who stared down at her son with an open mouth, utterly lost for words. Mrs Bury frowned and shook her head at Matilda as if she was a lost cause.

"Well, since the Master has final word on the matter ...," Matilda began, slowly taking a step towards the door with Barty, eager to escape into the fresh air. "I think we'll just..."

"That's all very well, but Bartholomew is not the master here," Frances said, recovering quickly and lifting her hand to stop them both from leaving. They both froze. Those amber eyes were beginning to glow dangerously, and Frances had used Barty's full name. They knew they might both be in trouble now.

"Your father is, and he has arranged this meeting for you. Whilst he is still the Duke of Sinclair and you still live here, you will do as he wishes."

Matilda felt a soft flare of temper which she tried to choke down. Just the mention of her father's authority in this matter was enough to make her angry. She tried to hide it, squeezing Barty's hand tightly

and speaking with a curt, clipped tone.

"I am not leaving the property, I am not defying his wishes," she said, holding Frances' gaze. "If this man is truly interested in courting me, then he can come and find Barty and I and join us in some polo."

"Heaven save us," Mrs Bury exclaimed. "Viscounts do not play polo with ladies!"

"It's alright, Mrs Bury." Frances patted their housekeeper's arm consolingly, shooting Matilda a frustrated look. "Fine, go. But don't disappear! I don't think your father will be very forgiving this time if you do."

"Thank you, Mama," Matilda breathed, rushing forward to kiss Frances gratefully on the cheek. "We'll not be long."

"Thank you, Mama!" Barty chorused, chasing off through the doors. "We'll be back before the gentleman who wants to buy Matilda from me comes!"

"Lord in Heaven," Mrs Bury groaned, disappearing back into the parlour as Matilda tried to stifle her giggles. Despite her frown, Matilda saw Frances' lip quirking involuntarily.

"You know, when I had a son I had no idea that his big sister would be able to be such a corrupting influence on him." Frances shook her head ruefully. "You are shaping him into a radical."

"Says the woman who once persuaded my father to withdraw thousands of pounds from sugar because slavery was abhorrent," Matilda retorted, and Frances chuckled appreciatively.

"You remember that, do you?" Frances sighed as Matilda nodded. "Well, enjoy it for now, my love. Wisdom comes with age, as does propriety." She nudged Matilda's side significantly. "Though I doubt you could ever be truly proper in that sense."

"Could the daughter of Frances Fortescue, the woman who rescued the Duke of Sinclair from a poisoner and survived an attempt on her life, be anything other?" Matilda said fondly, holding Frances' hand tenderly. She was proud to be Frances' child. She was proud of everything Frances had done to protect her and her father, even

before she was officially a member of the family. Some people had said Frances' had been inappropriate in her ardent affection for both Matilda and her father. Matilda could only be grateful.

"Oh, my love." Frances pressed her forehead against Matilda's and Matilda took a deep breath: the scent of rose and warmth that instantly made her feel at home. "I am proud of your strength of mind, but your father..."

"I know." Matilda pulled away, not wanting to talk about her father at that moment. When it came to the subject of her lack of suitor their disagreement was intense. She looked out of the main doors of the house to where Barty was excitedly having their ponies brought up. "Will you defer him for us whilst we play?"

"Of course." Frances squeezed her hand. "Be safe. Remember —,"

"Not to ride near the lake," Matilda finished for her, both of them recalling the near tragedy that had occurred when Frances was still Lady Fortescue and had thrown herself into the lake to save Matilda from drowning after falling from her horse. "I never forget. Until later, Mama."

Matilda kissed her mother's cheek and pulled away, running down the stairs of the main house to meet her brother and the groom on the gravel courtyard. The groom had two polo sticks slung over his shoulder and Barty was tossing the ball up in the air and catching it. Matilda felt her heart lighten. There was nothing like a ride out in the fresh air to shake away dark thoughts about the future.

"Are you ready to lose, Barty?" She grinned, grabbing her brother around the waist, and helping him mount his pony. The groom handed him the junior polo stick, the same one that she had used when her father had taught her to play.

"I don't think so!" Barty grinned, spurring his pony and trotting off towards the back lawn, twirling his stick in practice. Matilda let the groom help her mount the older pony, big enough to carry her light frame but not so large as to make it a dangerous game for Barty and his small steed.

"Thank you, James." Matilda took her own stick and laid it over her shoulders. "I'll take it from here."

She clicked her teeth and the pony obeyed. It was not her normal horse; Matilda favoured a bay stallion named Shakespeare, but all horses responded to her well. She had been riding since she was a little girl, and it was her one great love. There was nothing more thrilling to her than cantering away over the countryside, the trees and hedges rolling past her. Every season that passed only made her surer that society life was never going to be enough to satisfy her. She turned onto the makeshift pitch on the back lawn and saw Barty looking thoughtful as his pony nibbled grass.

“What’s on your mind, Barty?” Matilda asked, letting her pony trot in an easy circle around him.

“Daddy didn’t buy Mama, did he?” Barty frowned intently. “I thought they were in love.”

Matilda cursed her own hubris. She might be jaded from two years out in society, but there was no need Barty should be so disillusioned.

You are corrupting him!

“They are deeply in love,” Matilda said forcefully. “No, he didn’t do that. They would give their lives for one another. They are best friends. Their marriage is a marriage of souls, not only minds.”

“Oh. Good.” Barty looked relieved. “So have you never been in love like they are?”

His question, though gently asked, nearly knocked Matilda off her horse. She had always tried to be honest with her little brother, to tell him the truth even when it was difficult, but this was one thing she could tell no one.

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t think anyone is in love like Mama and Father. Besides,” she stuck her tongue out at Barty and twirled her pogo stick. “Gentlemen are boring and uninteresting.”

“Not all of them, surely?” Barty knocked the ball towards her, clearly more interested in their conversation than the sport. “You liked that boy who used to come and play when I was little.”

Matilda’s throat felt dry.

“What boy?” She asked innocently, knocking the ball back towards Barty with a little more force, hoping to egg him on and change the subject, but he let the ball roll past, barely looking at it.

“That boy!” he said insistently. “He used to visit our house, and we played with him. He was funny. He helped build the tree house in the forest.”

Oh goodness, the tree house.

She remembered Henry’s smile as he gripped her hand tightly, pulling her up the tree to the platform he and Barty had nailed together. His sister, Althea had been there too. How she had fantasised about kissing him in that tree house!

“I don’t remember.” Matilda nudged the pony forward, chasing the ball half-heartedly. “Are we going to play, or what?”

“Henry!” Barty exclaimed behind her. “That was his name! Henry Linfield! What happened to Henry?”

What had happened indeed. Matilda had her back to her brother and allowed herself to close her eyes briefly, swallowing down her emotions. How quickly she remembered her disappointment when Henry had not appeared at her debut, the crippling dismay when she overheard other ladies discussing his notoriety in town. Even at sixteen, she had known that Henry was developing a reputation as a rogue at Oxford, but it hadn’t stopped her heart from breaking. That night, barely holding back tears as she danced with gentleman after gentleman, wishing the whole sorry affair could be over, she had closed herself down. She had never seen Henry again. She had never felt that way about anyone else. Everyone in society might think she was eccentric and adverse to marriage and that was just as well, it was better than them knowing the truth: that her heart was foolishly and irrevocably given to Henry Linfield.

“Nothing happened.” Matilda tried to keep her voice light. “He grew up, that’s all. Now, let’s play some polo!”

Chapter Two

After an hour, Barty was worn out from polo and ready to go back in and find some jam tarts in the kitchen. Matilda wasn't so easily sated. The mention of Henry's name had rattled her more than she cared to admit. Riding the young pony on the back lawn had only whetted her appetite for a good ride over the fields with the wind in her hair. The last thing she wanted to do now was go back into the house and sit politely over tea whilst a viscount made eyes at her. She sighed heavily, dismounting to lead the pony back to the stables.

"What's the matter, Tilly?" Barty asked, looking at her solemnly as she helped him dismount at the stable.

"Nothing." Matilda smiled stiffly. "You should go inside and find something to eat."

"Your suitor will be here soon." Barty gazed back up to the house. "Shall I tell him to go away? That you're not allowed to get married?"

"No! I don't think father would like that." Matilda smiled and petted her brother's hair. It was soft and cold under her hand. She wondered at what age he would stop letting her touch him so affectionately. Time was so fleeting. Yet her father was ever more eager to find her a match. When that happened, she would be taken away from Sinclair Manor and lose these precious years watching her brother grow up. She couldn't help but feel resentful. Suddenly, all of her goodwill about meeting the viscount vanished.

"You go on ahead." Matilda gave the groom a significant nod as he took the pony's reigns from her and gave Barty a little push towards the house. "I'll be right behind."

"You're not coming?" Barty watched the groom walk towards

Shakespeare's stall and gasped. "You're going out? Mama said not to!"

"Don't you worry about that." Matilda ruffled his hair and smiled down. "I know you're hungry. Go on!"

"Alright." Barty took a hesitant step towards the house, watching as Shakespeare was brought out with a slight longing on his face. Matilda knew that Barty had high hopes for one day riding Shakespeare — he was a feisty stallion with a reddish gold coat and a black mane. He had been a gift for her seventeenth birthday from her father, and the best gift she had ever received, aside from her diary. "Don't be long?"

"Of course." Matilda swooped down and gave her brother a kiss. "I'll be back before you know it."

Barty pretended to scowl, rubbing at his forehead with the back of his hand as if full of distaste, but Matilda saw the happy blush in his cheeks as he ran away. As he trotted up the steps to the house, Matilda saw her lady's maid, Betty, running down the stairs towards her. No doubt she had been watching anxiously out of the window, trying to keep an eye on her mistress, clearly on orders from Frances. Matilda sighed and gently rubbed Shakespeare's nose, enjoying the velvety feel of his nostrils as she took a piece of apple that the groom gave her and fed it to him.

"We'll have a nice little ride, hey Shakespeare?" she murmured, rubbing her thumb against the white whorl on his forehead. "Maybe we'll go and call on Julia? That's a nice ride."

The horse snorted happily and pressed his nose into her palm. Matilda waited calmly for her flustered maid to arrive.

"Mistress, where are you going?" Betty gasped. "You have a caller coming —"

"Yes, unfortunately I have no interest in meeting a viscount today," Matilda said breezily, watching in amusement as Betty wrung her hands and looked back towards the house. "But do not worry, I am sure I shall be back with enough time to catch the tail-end of his appointment with my father."

"Oh, Lady Wynter, you cannot be earnest," Betty groaned, rubbing her

forehead. "Do you not remember the last time? Your father was so —"

"I shall deal with Father when I get home," Matilda said, quickly mounting Shakespeare. "At least then, I shall be in a better mood for it. Something that several tedious hours making small talk with a man old enough to be my father certainly shall not encourage."

"The Viscount has an excellent reputation. He is a kind man, and do you not think it is time that you moved on from Lord —"

"No, Betty." Matilda gave her maid an intense glare, but Betty wouldn't back down. She had been Matilda's lady's maid since Matilda was fourteen and wasn't afraid of a little stare. She stepped forward, gently pulling Matilda's skirt down to cover her boot.

"I remember the night of your debut, my lady," she said, quietly. "You were so excited. So full of hope. It saddens me to think that you have lost that part of yourself."

Matilda's eyes stung suddenly with unshed tears. Betty's words were touching the deep, sore place of her that still longed for Henry Linfield. Together, the two of them lapsed into silence as the memory of the night of her debut rushed between them.

Betty was setting a crown of white roses and pearls into Matilda's hair. Matilda was fidgeting, tugging at her gloves.

"Don't worry, my lady." Betty pressed her hands onto Matilda's shoulders and caught her eye in the mirror, smiling brightly. "He will be there."

"Do you think he will dance with me?" Matilda whispered, blushing terribly in her white muslin gown. It was all she wished for, to have Henry's face close to hers and his hand in hers as they swirled perfectly in the centre of the dance floor.

"I am certain of it," Betty giggled. "He is always so friendly toward you! I cannot imagine why he would not."

Betty spoke first, interrupting their reminiscing. Matilda both relieved and sad to leave that bitter-sweet memory, and looked down at her maid with glassy eyes.

“If you loved before, you could love again,” Betty whispered encouragingly. “Another gentleman might alight those same feelings in you that Lord Linfield —”

“No,” Matilda cut her off, swallowing painful tears. She shook her head fiercely. “There is no other.”

“Oh, my lady. You cannot pine forever.” Betty sighed sadly, patting Shakespeare’s neck.

“I can do whatever I wish,” Matilda sniffed, feeling petulant, but Betty was undeterred and shook her head.

“Is that what you wish for your life, my lady?” Betty squeezed Matilda’s hand. “To long for a boy from the past and let your future disappear?”

I don’t want a future without Henry in it, Matilda thought, but it was too close to her heart to speak out loud. Besides, it would sound bizarre to Betty, who only wanted her to be safe and content like her parents did. How could Betty understand that Matilda would rather live alone than marry someone who wasn’t Henry?

“I won’t be long,” Matilda said, blinking away disappointed tears as she clicked her teeth.

“You’re not taking the groom with you?” Betty’s eyes widened. “Again?”

“I am perfectly capable of riding the five miles to Julia’s house alone,” Matilda snapped.

“You are a lady. You should not be riding anywhere unchaperoned, please!” Betty implored her, giving her the same look Mrs Bury did when she did something ‘eccentric.’

“I have been riding alone since I was a child, Betty,” Matilda sighed.

“But you are not a child any longer,” Betty countered. “You know it will enrage your father to know you have left, and left alone. It is most inappropriate for a lady.”

"I am my own person, Betty, I can make my own decisions!" Matilda pressed her heels into Shakespeare's belly, turning him around to face the rolling fields. She saw Betty's face, her sad, worried expression and the tightness around Matilda's heart eased a little. She sighed and reached out for Betty's hand.

"I do not wish to be rude," she said softly. "I only wish to be free, Betty. I shall be safe, and you can send a groom to ride back with me, if you must. If you are worried. Just...let me have my ride."

"Oh, my lady, I know better than to test my mettle against your strong will," Betty smiled, squeezing her mistress' hand, and then stepping back. "I shall tell the Duchess where you are. I am sure she can manage your father for a while."

"If anyone can, it's Mama," Matilda smiled, setting Shakespeare into an easy trot towards the gate. "I'll be back shortly!"

As she set her sights over the hills she let Shakespeare ease into a steady canter as he prepared himself to jump the fence to the field. When he took it with an elegant leap, she closed her eyes for a moment and imagined that she was flying. How nice it would be to be entirely free of all responsibility, to not have to worry about making a match or the future or what it would feel like to walk down the aisle on her wedding day and make promises to a man she didn't love. The wind whipped through her hair and she unconsciously pulled it free of its bindings, letting her dark tresses stream behind her. She loved the feeling of it, and on a usual day it was enough to lighten her mood, but not today. Today she could not shake the memories of Henry.

"Henry, don't!" She laughed, raising her arms to cover her face as Henry splashed water at her.

"Come further in, the water's lovely!" Henry chuckled. He was knee deep in the brook on the Sinclair estate. It was a boiling hot summer's day and Matilda was fourteen. She and Henry and Althea were playing in the Sinclair woods, but Althea had deferred the option to join them in the cool, rushing water of the stream, saying it was too cold. Matilda was revelling in this surprising moment of solitude in Henry's company, helplessly giggling as she tucked her skirts around her knees and waded out towards him. Suddenly, her footing slipped away from her and she stumbled, plunged deeper into the water than she anticipated, soaking her gown up to her thighs and splashing water into her face. Henry doubled over in

laughter, overjoyed by his prank.

“Henry! You beast!” Matilda cried, floundering to find her feet in the strong water, drenched to her skin. “You knew! How could you do this?”

“In my defence, Tills, it was very funny.” Henry grinned, grasping her by the elbows and pulling her up onto the higher ground he deceptively stood on. Her gown clung wetly to her legs and she clutched his forearms to steady herself, feeling his warm, suntanned skin under her fingers.

“Don’t call me that,” Matilda had mumbled, her face flushing to be so close to him, her heart pounding furiously. “Don’t call me Tills.”

“Why not?” Henry teased, tugging on her wet hair, and flicking one of her sopping, wet curls into her eyes. “It’s funny. I like it.”

“Should you like it if I called you Linnie?” Matilda asked in mock bravado. “Linnie Lord Linfield?”

“Ha!” Henry threw back his head, laughing uproariously. He was so perfect to look at and Matilda hadn’t been able to stop herself staring. He was sixteen years old, already becoming a man. His blonde hair curled alluring against his forehead, slightly damp from the river. His skin had tanned a glorious gold in the summer sun and his throat was slightly red in a patch at the bottom of his neck, where gold curls of chest hair had begun to grow. His blue eyes sparkled humorously in the golden sunshine.

“You can call me whatever you want, Tills,” he joked, giving her his most charming smile.

Even in memory, Matilda felt like she had been given no choice. She would not have been able to stop herself falling in love with him even if she had tried. She sighed heavily, realizing that in her remembrances she had ridden all the way to Julia’s without a second thought. She reined in Shakespeare and dismounted, just as Julia opened the door and stepped out, smiling to greet her friend.

“Goodness, Matilda, you came here without a groom?” Julia shook her head, as if the whole thing was very funny. “You really have no intention of catching a husband, do you?”

“I find such things rarely interest me.” Matilda ignored the barb and handed Shakespeare’s reigns to a waiting servant.

“Oh, well, then I have some delicious news that I am sure will interest you,” Julia said, her eyes alight with mischief.

“Oh, gossip is it?” Matilda asked wryly. “I hope it is not about me.”

“No, it is not, but it is about a family that once was closely associated with yours,” Julia wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. “Can you guess?”

“I would rather not,” Matilda sighed, “and I should dearly like some tea, so can you cut to the chase, dear Julia? Who does this gossip concern and why should I care?”

“I cannot answer the second for you, only you know your own interest.” Julia giggled infuriatingly. “But as for the first question, I shall tell you. It is none other than the eldest son of Baron Foley.”

“Baron Foley?” Matilda’s heart cramped painfully. It seemed that wherever she went today, a certain name was destined to follow her. “You mean ...?”

“Oh yes,” Julia nodded smugly. “None other than your old friend, Henry Linfield.”

Chapter Three

“Linfield! Linfield, is that you?”

Henry looked up from his brandy and cards to see his friend, Lord Owen Barton, grinning down on him, dark hair unruly and a beautiful show girl on his arm.

“Barton!” Henry launched himself to his feet and tugged his friend toward him in a close hug, spilling both of their drinks. “What are you doing here?”

Owen Barton was supposed to be enjoying an extended tour of Italy, something of which Henry had struggled not to be profoundly envious. Yet he found himself relieved to see his old friend's face. It had already been a hell of a week.

“Much the same as you, I imagine.” Owen laughed, looking down at Henry's dishevelled appearance, taking note of the brandy stains on his cuffs. “Though you seem a little further along in our shared pursuit than I am.”

“Oh yes, to your health, dear friend!” Henry grinned, knocking his glass back in one smooth movement before setting it on the table. He enjoyed the warm feeling of the brandy spreading from his throat down to his fingers. How delightful it was to have liquor, this magical potion, that whisked him away from his troubles without ever having to leave his body. It made him almost giddy, and surpassing his laughter, he gestured down to the game of hearts he was engaged in.

“Should you like to join our game, Barton?”

“Oh no, I only came to congratulate you!” Owen clapped Henry on his shoulder, looking at him with an inquiring gaze. “You are to be married? I could not believe it when I heard! Is it true? Or has some

malicious Mama been trying to hook you in for her daughter? Have you finally succumbed?"

Henry's good mood evaporated at his friend's observations. He could practically feel the eyes of every gentleman in the place fixed on him, curious to see how he would reply to such incisive remarks. Henry had proclaimed his dislike of the institution of marriage to every man there, he could sense their collective recollections rising, wondering if this was the moment he would let the façade fall and reveal his entrapment. Henry stomach clenched like iron and he set his jaw. He would give them no such satisfaction. He didn't respond and lifted his empty glass towards the server who refilled it wordlessly. Henry took several large gulps and then grinned at his friend again.

"Oh, indeed!" He spread his arms wide. "We are making such a night of it! For I am to be married, aren't I, gents? It is to be my next grand adventure!"

The drunken gentlemen around him took up a roar of approval, grinning and smirking as they gambled and drank, no doubt shaking their heads, amazed that such a cad like Henry Linfield had been hoodwinked into believing he was having fun. *Better they think me a fool than they know the truth*, Henry thought darkly, downing his drink again. *Let them think me daft and in my cups rather than they see how low I truly am!*

Unfortunately, Owen was a much more perceptive friend than the fellows around him. He frowned briefly, catching Henry's eye for a moment, and then affixed a falsely happy grin on his own face.

"And what a night we shall make of it! I have two premium cigars with our names on them. Care to join me, Linfield?"

Henry recognised this for what it truly was: an opportunity to talk alone. He was at once grateful for his friend and also cursing his perception. How much easier it would have been to play out his charade as the happy, oblivious bridegroom if his best friend hadn't suddenly returned from the continent! Henry was on the edge of denying him, hoping that Owen would let it alone, but then Owen raised his eyebrows and leaned in closer, speaking so that only Henry could hear him.

"It is cigars, or I shall throw a punch and get us both tossed into the

street,” Owen whispered. “I am not averse to the second option.”

Of course, he wasn’t. Owen and Henry had gone many rounds at Oxford and Owen’s right hook was legendary. Henry smiled at his friend.

“Well, of course!” Henry announced loudly, folding his cards on the table. “A cigar sounds capital! Deal me out, gents, I have an appointment with Lord Barton.”

“Perhaps my friend, Scarlet, can keep your seat warm for you?” Owen said, pulling Henry’s chair back for the beautiful woman on his arm. “Scarlet loves to gamble, don’t you, sweet thing?”

Scarlet blushed deeply but there was a mercenary twinkle in her eye.

“She’s a dab hand, give her a crown and she’ll make a fortune, just watch,” Owen whispered to Henry as he handed over his cards to Scarlet. Henry knew that Owen liked to keep girls who had certain talents and so left enough money on the table for Scarlet to stay in the game.

“Double my winnings and there’s a few in there for you,” Henry muttered as he leaned over her shoulder. She smelled enticing; that combination of show girl rouge and sweat that he always associated with a night of revelry and debauchery.

“Of course, my lord,” she whispered back, her dark eyes lingering on his. Henry felt a familiar jerk around his navel. He wondered idly if she would end up in his bed later that night. Now that would be a fitting wedding celebration.

“Come on,” Owen nudged Henry’s shoulder. “Let the girl manage her business. We shan’t be but a moment, sweet thing!” Owen pressed a lingering kiss to Scarlet’s knuckles, and she grinned cannily. Then Owen ushered Henry to the smoking room, blissfully empty, and closed the door.

“Well, she’s a fine thing,” Henry said, idly taking up a billiards cue and twirling it. “Is she a regular of yours or just a nightly engagement?”

“A little of both, I should reckon.” Owen reached into his breast

pocket and pulled out a cigar case. "I only see her rarely, when I have the desire to make money off my friends —," Owen grinned rakishly and winked at Henry, "— usually when I come back from my travels and am somewhat poor in pocket. She's a secret weapon of mine."

"And easy on the eyes, too," Henry said, glancing back to the door and remembering Scarlet's dark, enticing eyes. He wasn't sure if it was because Owen had exquisite taste in women or if it was because he was a little too drunk and maudlin, but Scarlet seemed like everything he wanted right now.

"You think so?" Owen struck a match and lit both cigars. "Well, I have not engaged her for the entire night. I have another...arrangement lined up. I could ask her if she has someone to keep her warm until morning."

"You could?" Henry grinned at his friend. Now here was something that could make him feel better. A night with a beautiful woman in his arms, kissing his cares away.

"Providing that you are honest with me," Owen said, passing the cigar to his friend.

"When have I not been?" Henry took it and set it to his lips, the taste of fine tobacco filling his mouth. "Do you not recall the time at Kings when I was the only one who would tell you that the beauty who served drinks at the pub was thoroughly disinterested in your advances, that she was, in fact, married? Even though you threatened to duel me for such words?"

"In all fairness, I was in love." Owen smiled at the memory.

"So, you proclaimed whilst brandishing a pistol at me, if I remember correctly," Henry added drily.

"Well, love makes fools of us all." Owen sighed, breathing out smoke.

"Not me."

"Oh?" Owen looked at him sharply, and Henry had the feeling of a trap closing around him. "So, it is not a love match, is it? There goes my theory that the only thing that could compel Henry Linfield down the aisle would be the deepest love."

Henry snorted and said nothing, exhaling clove scented smoke as he set his cigar between his teeth and bent over the billiards table, lining up the cue.

“Then why?” Owen mused, leaning against the table. “If not love, why marriage? God knows you have railed against it long enough.”

“Do not all young men?” Henry took the shot, watching the ball as it bounced against the side. “We all railed against marriage in our youthful indiscretions.”

“But none of us so long nor so persistently,” Owen countered, eyeing his friend carefully. “You have not...”

“Not what?” Henry looked up at his friend in confusion. Owen looked uncomfortable.

“You have not ... dishonoured a lady, have you?” he asked tentatively.

“What sort of laggard do you take me for?” Henry glared up at his friend. “Do I strike you as the type of gentleman to sully a lady’s reputation? I am a lot of things, but I hope I am not that!”

“I am sorry, one has to ask!” Owen held up with hands in admission of guilt.

“One does not,” Henry snapped. “Christ, Owen! Is it so unlikely that I would marry that you must immediately assume I am being coerced to save face?”

“Honestly?” Owen raised his eyebrows. “Yes.”

Owen’s words took all of the wind out of Henry. He bit the inside of his cheek, trying to hold back the truth as it threatened to spill out of him. He had promised to say nothing of it. He would not break his promise.

“You did promise me honesty,” Owen reminded him gently, as if reading his thoughts. “So why marriage? Why now? Why her?”

Henry took a long drag on the cigar, letting the fragrant smoke fill his lungs and then shrugged.

“It is time, that is all,” Henry said, repeating what his father had said to him after his commandment had been given down, as if these words alone were enough to compel him into a life he wanted no part of. “It is high time I was married.”

“I see.” Henry bent over the table, avoiding Owen’s eye as he lined up the cue.

“So, it is to be Miss Danforth then?”

Daphne Danforth, daughter of a gentleman of new money, up and coming in society. More than happy to marry his spinster daughter away to become Lady Linfield, future Baroness Foley. She was as dull as dishwater and very plain to Henry’s eyes, though his father said she was considered fair. Henry did not see it, not unless simpering, insipid looking blondes were to a gentleman’s taste. Not that any of that mattered. In two weeks, she would be Henry’s bride and in his bed, whether he liked it or not. He did not.

“Yes. Henry took the shot. He could almost hear Owen’s churning thoughts across the table.

“You know, I heard a rumour around Miss Danforth when I came back to town.”

Henry paused in lining up his next shot. “Oh? From whom?”

“From Scarlet, of all people, but she’s better than a scandal sheet on matters of society. Paid girls hear all the best rumours.” Owen took a puff of his cigar and watched Henry take his next shot. “She heard that a lady in the Danforth house had been caught out with a local gentleman who now refuses to marry her.”

Henry tried to keep a blank face. Of course, Owen would have access to all the best gossip, even a story that had been so thoroughly and entirely covered up by the family. The truth was worse than Owen described. The local gentleman in question was in fact the second son of the county Viscount and the two had not been caught out as much as Miss Danforth had been caught in his bed. The son of the viscount had no need to marry a lowly gentleman’s daughter and had been sent overseas by his father, leaving the girl to weather her shame alone. Or at least she would have been left alone, before Henry’s father got involved. Henry chalked the end of his cue vigorously.

“Ugly rumours,” he said lightly. “Did Scarlet happen to say which lady it referred to? As you know, Mr Danforth has five daughters.”

“She did not, and you are of course right to reprimand me, the rumours are ugly but also curious when taken into account with other information,” Owen said, taking a puff on his cigar. “You know now that Scarlet is a proficient gambler.”

“Yes,” Henry said tersely, his whole body tensing at the word but allowing his friend to continue.

“Well, she moves in certain circles and gathers useful information for me, who is heavy with coin, who has debts owed, that sort of thing.”

Owen looked at Henry carefully, as if watching his reaction. Henry lined up his next shot and said nothing. If Owen wanted to suggest something, he was going to have to suggest it himself.

“She had heard that someone of the Linfield name was in deep debt to Mr Danforth.” Owen blew out smoke and let his words settle. He was clearly waiting for Henry to confirm his hunches, but Henry said nothing. He was bound to silence. His honour and Miss Danforth’s compelled him.

“One could infer from all of this,” Owen said quietly when he realised his friend would never speak. “That you owed Danforth a fortune and he, seeing an opportunity, said that all debts would be settled if you married his soon to be disgraced daughter.”

“That is quite a scheme,” Henry said drily, taking his shot with a little too much vigour. The loud clack of the billiards balls filled the room. “Of course, it is all gossip.”

“Why, of course.” Owen waved his cigar in the air. “Mere fantasy. Yet it is certainly a more compelling reason as to why my best friend would now, against all the make up of his character, decide to marry.”

Henry snorted and said nothing, taking a drag of his cigar and wishing he had a drink nearby. The room felt too stuffy now, the cigar smoke oppressive and cloying, and he strode to the door, opening it briefly.

“For the love of God, will someone fetch us some brandy?!” he bellowed out into the corridor, the servant who stood on guard

outside springing into action. Henry took a few deep breaths of the cooler, less smoky air, before closing the door on them again.

“Henry.”

He jerked around, surprised to hear Owen use his first name. Owen was looking at him with tender eyes.

“If you were so far in debt you could have just asked.”

Henry’s shoulders slumped at his friend’s generosity. Owen was the heir to a dukedom, and unlike Henry, did not have a father who was prone to racking up extensive gambling debts. Henry rubbed his face, too tired to continue his façade.

“If it were my debt that needed paid I would have, Owen,” he said shortly, placing both hands on the edge of the billiards table and taking several deep breaths.

“Ah. I see.”

Of course, Owen saw. Anyone gentleman with half a mind knew that of the two Linfield men, Henry Linfield never gambled over his pocket. His father, Baron Foley, on the other hand had been paying off outrageous debts in curious ways for years. The bill had finally come due for this one. When Mr Danforth had been unable to compel the Viscount to give up his son in marriage to Danforth’s sullied daughter, he had brought his dilemma to Foley’s door. Henry loved his father, but he didn’t always respect or admire him. The Baron had traded Henry’s future away as if it were a gambling chip to be thrown on the table. Henry knew that Owen’s father would never treat his heir’s future so lightly. Gambling had made the Baron careless, self-serving, and cruel and it hurt Henry deeply. So deeply he had been trying to numb the pain with alcohol and levity ever since.

“Have a drink,” Henry heard the door open behind him and then felt Owen set a glass of brandy down beside his hand which he hadn’t realised was shaking. He gratefully took a restorative slug. Only then did he feel like he could face his friend.

“The debt was so high?” Owen asked quietly.

“High enough to ruin us if it could not be paid, and it cannot be.”

Henry barked out a joyless laugh and shook his head. "And now I am to be married to a woman I care not a whit for."

"You could refuse. Go abroad. Get away from it all. He doesn't own you, Henry!" Owen grasped his arm. "Come to Italy with me, I'll keep you afloat. Damn your father and his foolish ways!"

It was such a generous offer that Henry had to blink back tears. For a moment, he was reminded of childhood words spoken in a tree house with a friend endowed with so much fortune and promise it made him believe the world could be theirs for the taking. *All I want is to be free to live and act as I please.* What Owen was offering had the taste of that freedom. Then he shook his head.

"I cannot," he said shortly.

"Why?"

"Althea," he smiled to say his sister's name, despite the horrible context. "And Medea."

"Ah." Owen leaned against the billiards table with him, swirling his brandy glass. "Althea is eighteen years old now? It is her first season? And Medea —"

"Is only fifteen," Henry said dully. "Medea is not yet out. I must find Althea a match first, and I cannot do that if I am not in the country."

Or if my family's reputation has been entirely ruined by Mr Danforth calling in all his debt and bankrupting us.

Althea and Medea. None of this was their fault. They were just two young women dependent on their father to raise their social status. A father who had used their plight to further coerce Henry into compliance. *Think of your sisters, Henry! This match with the Danforth girl is for their benefit.* His father's deliberately manipulative words still rang in his head. He gripped the stem of his brandy glass tightly, pushing his rage back down inside.

"I see." Owen took a sip of his brandy and stared at the ceiling. "You know, Henry, you perpetuate this social opinion of yourself as a rake, without care or responsibility, yet here you stand ...,"

Owen looked his friend in the eye and Henry saw the pride and sincerity there.

“... the most honourable man I know.”

Henry clenched his jaw, swallowing hard. Perhaps it was too much brandy, but he was overwhelmed with the instinct to weep like a small child. How desperately he wished his circumstances were different! That his father was not a gambler, that he had no sisters to protect, or that he was simply enough of a true rake to put his own happiness above them all and disappear from England forever, like Owen had generously offered. But he was not. He was an honourable man, and because of that, in two weeks he would be husband to a wife he didn't want, but his family would be secure. That was all that mattered. No matter what his reckless heart said, no matter how dearly he wished that someone, anyone would rescue him from this fate he was bound to endure. He nodded stiffly, raising his glass.

“I'll drink to that,” he said.

Chapter Four

“Come in and join us, Matilda. We have much to discuss!” Julia giggled, her eyes glittering with intrigue as she led Matilda through the house and out into the conservatory where a few other ladies sat, fanning themselves against the warm summer breeze and sipping glasses of lemonade. Matilda’s heart sank, realising that she had accidentally walked into a tea party. This was not what she needed.

“Matilda, you know my friend, Miss Agatha Dawlish —,”

Julia gestured to a strawberry blonde girl with a pudgy frame who Matilda knew was in her first season, and very giggly.

“— and of course, you are intimately acquainted Miss Tallulah Fortescue —”

Matilda groaned inwardly as she looked at the older, more polished woman at Agatha’s side. Tallulah or Lulu, as she was often known, was the youngest sister of Amelia Fortescue whom Matilda famously despised. Amelia was in fact Frances’ cousin on the Fortescue side, and Frances had told Matilda once about the terrible things Amelia had suggested about Frances when they were both young girls. They had a long rivalry which had ended in bitterness on Amelia’s part when Frances had married a Duke. That bitterness had been conveyed to her sisters, of whom there were many. At any family gatherings Frances and Matilda had attended, Matilda had witnessed that sneering bitterness from Amelia, even though she held the title of Marchioness Huntley and had borne her husband many more children than Frances had. Lulu looked about as happy to see Matilda as Matilda was to see her, but she smiled tightly, flipping her light brown curls.

“Lovely to see you again, cousin,” she simpered, rising to kiss Matilda drily on each cheek. “How is your father? Your stepmother?”

“They are well, I thank you,” Matilda said, through gritted teeth. Despite the Marchioness Huntley and all of her sisters knowing that Matilda called Frances her mother, they refused to refer to her as such. It was a slight against them both, Matilda knew, deliberately reminding them that Frances was a mere second wife.

“How is your sister, the Marchioness Huntley?”

“Oh, she is quite well.” Lulu sat back down, adjusting her shawl. “She is expecting yet another child in the spring.”

“How exciting!” Agatha leaned forward at this new piece of gossip, her cheeks alight with a blush. “This will be her fourth child, will it not?”

Matilda shuddered at the thought of four children in the time that Barty had been alive, but Agatha couldn’t look more engaged. Matilda recognised Agatha’s type. She was a girl who gravitated towards any information to do with home life, marriage or children. No doubt she was utterly desperate to settle down, though Matilda knew she was barely sixteen.

“It shall, my sister has always desired a large family and she tends to get everything she desires.”

Lulu sat back, preening, as if her sister’s fertility was a great boon for her social status though Matilda could see no reason why it had anything to do with her. As if she could sense Matilda’s distaste, Lulu’s eyes fixed on hers.

“The Duchess only has one child, does she not?” Lulu said lightly, implicitly comparing Frances and Amelia. Matilda bristled.

“She has two.” Matilda gratefully took the cup of lemonade, taking a long sip to steady her annoyance. “Myself and my brother are quite content as we are, thank you.”

“Oh, I am sure.” Lulu waved her hand as if Matilda’s words mean nothing. “But only one heir.”

Matilda balled her hands into fists on the cushion beside her.

“There is not only one heir,” Matilda growled, receiving a terrified look from Agatha and a roll of her eyes from Lulu. “For I am second in line for my father’s title should anything happen, which it will not, and it is quite unbecoming of you to suggest it might.”

“What do you mean?” Agatha leaned forward again, her reddish blonde brows knitted together. “How could your father make you a Duke?”

“He could not.” Julia put her hand on Agatha’s, explaining to the younger girl gently whilst Lulu and Matilda looked daggers at one another. “But he could make Matilda the bearer of his line, so her son would become a Duke, if she had one.”

“How is that possible?” Agatha looked at Matilda like she was a strange beast from the underworld. “You have to be a man to inherit! It’s the law.”

“It is the law, but certain peerages can be amended for female inheritors.” Julia smiled at Matilda. “The Duke of Marlborough’s patent was amended so that her grace, Harriot Marlborough could become the Duchess.”

“And your father has done such a thing for you?” Agatha stared at Matilda in wonder, as if she was a rare bird, which, Matilda supposed darkly, she was a little. Matilda sighed inwardly at the prospect of explaining her uniqueness yet again.

“He has. On the condition of my brother’s death and that my mother bore no more sons,” Matilda said stiffly. She did not like to talk about it. Lulu rolled her eyes again.

“Only under the instruction of the Duchess of Sinclair,” Lulu sneered. Matilda’s hackles instantly went up. “Only such a radicalised child of the Baron Fortescue would come up with such a scheme.”

“You are wrong. It was entirely my father’s notion,” Matilda said coldly, irritated by Lulu’s characterisation of Frances’ background. “And if my mama was ‘radicalised’ as you call it, it was entirely for the benefit of our family. Only a woman such as Frances Fortescue could have saved both me and my father from certain death.”

“Certain death?” Agatha’s eyes were as round as saucers. “You’re

talking about the famous story? The one where your mother saved your father from a poisoner?"

"Oh, everyone knows that story has been exaggerated!" Lulu scoffed. "A money-grubbing relative becomes a poisoner, it is too much fiction for words, and the idea that the Duke of Sinclair would be bizarre enough to adapt the patent of his dukedom to you —,"

"Lulu, please," Julia flustered, knowing that Lulu was verging into the realms of a family argument. "Have a biscuit or something."

"What? It is thoroughly bizarre!" Lulu glared at Matilda. "Some people have the impression that they are the sun and the moon and that they are outside the bounds of normal society, but they are merely over praised, spoiled brats who —,"

"Lulu!" Julia snapped, all residue of the elegant hostess dropped. "You cannot speak of Lady Wynter like that!"

Agatha's eyes widened as Julia reminded them of Matilda's elevated status compared to them all. Lulu's sister might have ascended to the seat of a marchioness through marriage, but Agatha and Lulu were still without titles, as was the unmarried Julia. Matilda smiled a wintry smile, enjoying the irritation in Lulu's eyes as she bit back anger.

"No, it is quite alright, Julia, we are all friends here," Matilda said lightly, thoroughly intending to make Lulu squirm. "It might seem disorderly for a father to have such foresight in naming a daughter his heir, but it is simply a fact that many fathers do not believe their daughters would have the strength of will or political acumen to handle such a role. My father has no such worries of me."

"No such worries?" Lulu smirked into her tea. "One true heir and a daughter is hardly enough to secure a family."

Matilda fought down the urge to slap her. What Lulu didn't know, what Amelia didn't know, was that Barty's birth had been a difficult one for all involved. Matilda could barely stop herself from shuddering to remember it, the night of horrible pain that Frances had barely survived, and her own father's near unravelling at her struggle. It was only Holton, her father's one true friend, that held her father together. Then, in the morning, when Matilda and her father had

finally been able to embrace Frances and the beautiful baby boy, her father had turned to his wife and said, "Never again."

She was only ten years old, but when Matilda had looked into her father's bleak eyes she recognised there a hint of the pain she had seen when Frances had nearly died at her Aunt's hand, or when Frances and her father had been parted before their engagement, due to a misunderstanding in their courtship. Her father had been flung into a deep depression and sent Matilda away to school. Even though she was afraid for her Mama, was scared of the bloodstained sheets and Frances' pale face, Matilda was more afraid that her father would break if Frances had to go through childbirth again. She had been glad to carry some of the burden of her family at the time. Now, nearly ten years later, with the weight of family expectation pressing down on her, she wasn't sure she was so glad anymore. But there was nothing on earth that would make Matilda confess the intimate secrets of her family to such a foolish girl as Lulu.

"If one boy is not enough to secure a family then I dread to think what a state your family must be in, Lulu," Matilda said angrily, setting her lemonade cup down. "You are one of five daughters and the Marchioness Huntley has no son, after all."

Lulu flushed red at the insinuation.

"She will have," Lulu said. "She is sure this one is a boy."

"Just as she was sure of all the others?" Matilda retorted. She had absolutely had enough. She turned to Julia. "Julia, what is this gossip you tell me of?"

At this point, even Julia's mindless gossip about Henry Linfield would be more entertaining than having to defend her family from Lulu Fortescue.

"Yes!" Julia clapped her hands, relieved to be able to move the conversation onwards. "Our dear Agatha has heard the most fascinating tale that she brings with her to tea this afternoon. Agatha dear, won't you explain? Lulu, let me refill your lemonade. Matilda, do have a biscuit."

Matilda reluctantly took one of the Viennese biscuits that Julia's cook was so well known for. She knew that Julia was hoping that by plying

Matilda with biscuits and giving Lulu more to drink she would enable them to keep both of their mouths shut long enough for their shared distaste and anger to simmer down.

“Oh, yes,” Agatha stuttered, looking furtively between Matilda and Lulu as if they were puppets she was still expecting to jerk into life and perform for her again. Matilda grudgingly supposed that her ferocity and her cousin’s contempt, they had been putting on quite a show. “Well, it’s about the Linfield estate, or rather, I should say, an association they have.”

“Linfield?” Lulu’s eyebrows shot up. “The Linfields that are local here? The acquaintances of the Duke of Sinclair?”

“Oh yes,” Julia nodded, and then turned to Agatha to explain. “Matilda and myself grew up with the Linfields. We were particularly acquainted with Lord Henry Linfield and Lady Althea Linfield in childhood.”

“Yes, we knew them very well,” Matilda said, swallowing her biscuit. “So, what is the gossip?”

“Well, you have heard I suppose that Lord Linfield is a ...,” Agatha seemed to stumble over the right word, going red in the face.

“A flirt?” Matilda supplied, trying to be helpful.

“A lady’s man?” Julia added.

“A rake? A cad, through and through?” Lulu said, much to Matilda’s annoyance.

Even though she knew of Henry’s reputation, it still hurt to hear other people call him by such names. Yet she could say nothing to defend him. His actions, his bills piled up high at all the most notorious London clubs, spoke for themselves. All Matilda could do was tell herself what she knew to be true in her heart.

That’s not who is, not deep down inside. I know the real Henry, he is an honourable man -

“... a popular gentleman,” Agatha said, finally settling on a neutral

wording, her cheeks as pinks as roses. “Well, it seems that he has finally been ... caught.”

Matilda’s stomach dropped.

“What do you mean, caught?” Lulu asked sharply. “Has he been caught ... with a lady? In a compromising position?”

Matilda held her breath, trying not to imagine it, but she couldn’t help it. Instantly she remembered Henry’s strong jaw line, his broad, fine hands. She imagined those hands wrapped around her waist, holding her close, imagined his firm lips pressed against hers, again and again.

“No, not exactly.” Agatha blushed at the description and fiddled with her hands. “It is that he is caught by a lady. He is to be married.”

“Henry Linfield married? Who on earth to?” Lulu asked.

Matilda thought her heart might have stopped. She deliberately turned her face towards the brightness of the low afternoon sun, so she had a reason to close her eyes against it. She took a deep breath, letting the words of the ladies around her wash over her as she tried to control her emotions. This was not what she had expected from her visit to Julia’s when she avoided tea with a viscount! First she’d been forced to defend her family and now this, possibly some of the worst news a person could deliver to her, dropped at her door. As if it was nothing more than juicy gossip and not a heart-breaking destruction of a long-held dream.

He swore he would never do this, I expected other women, other attachments, but he promised he would not ever get married —

“How is this come about?” Matilda said, interrupting Agatha’s account of the state of the Danforth estate, the family of an up-and-coming gentleman that was entirely made up of gossipy, shallow daughters. “Henry — I mean, Lord Linfield always said he would never marry.”

“Oh?” Lulu’s eyes flashed at the slip up in her words and Matilda cursed herself for her emotional carelessness. “You seem to have been quite...intimate with Mr Linfield for him to tell you this, Lady Wynter.”

“It is hardly a secret,” Julia put in, saving Matilda from having to

defend herself. “Lord Linfield always made it very well known to all his friends how adverse he was to the marital condition.”

“Still...to call him by his first name ...” Lulu prodded, watching Matilda very carefully.

“Oh, what are first names between childhood friends?” Julia scoffed, and Matilda was overwhelmingly grateful for her friend’s candour and confidence.

“When we were all children running through the Sinclair woods, we weren’t calling one another by our titles! I confess, I find it confusing sometimes to call my own dear Matilda by her honorific in public.”

Julia reached out and squeezed Matilda’s hand, smiling at her gently. For all the times Julia had teased Matilda over the years over her childhood affection for Henry Linfield, she would not allow Lulu the same privilege.

“So, tell us more, Agatha,” Julia said, withdrawing her hand and looking at the youngest member of their company. “How has Lord Linfield come to be caught?”

“It is the strangest thing,” Agatha said, lowering her voice and leaning forward as if she was worried they would be overheard in the sheltered, private garden. “For he is engaged to Miss Daphne Danforth, and everyone knows she is no great beauty and not as charming as her other sisters. She’s known to be quite ... silly.”

“An understatement,” Lulu muttered.

“At first I thought it could be a love match.” Agatha whispered.

“A love match? Please,” Lulu snorted. “A man like Linfield isn’t capable of such things. Rumour has it he has a new bed warmer every week.”

Matilda wondered if she could throw lemonade in Lulu’s face without ruining the tea party. She clenched her fists against the cushions of the chair and reminded herself of what her Mama had always taught her — that a lady should never let her enemies see her sweat.

"It is unlikely to be a love match," Julia was saying. "What more do you know of the Danforths?"

"I know them well," Agatha said, clearly enjoying being the one with all the knowledge. "The Danforth's have been acquainted with our family for some time, my elder sister is a close friend with Daphne, and she says that there has always been an ...affection between Miss Danforth and the son of a local viscount."

"Who?" Lulu said, her face eager for this exciting gossip. Matilda could feel the biscuit and lemonade souring in her stomach at these words. Why would Henry, a man who had always despised the idea of marriage, attach himself to a woman known to be attached to someone else? It was unthinkable.

"I couldn't say," Agatha stammered. "I only know there was some... turbulence in the Danforth house in the last month. Daphne was forbidden from having any social engagements and then, well, it might have been coincidence, but it was all over town that the viscount had sent his son away..."

"And then I supposed it was announced that Miss Danforth was going to wed Lord Linfield." Julia shook her head. "It would be just like him to swoop in and save her, he always liked to be the knight in shining armour."

Not at the risk of his personal happiness, Matilda thought. Not for a girl he didn't know, or love. Is it possible he's in love? Matilda's stomach swirled queasily at the thought.

"Oh please!" Lulu scoffed, "you speak as if it is an act of grand romance, but a match like this does not speak of love or honour. I can assure you that Lord Linfield will not be entering into a match unless there is something in it for him."

"You speak as if you know his every motive," Matilda snapped, glaring at Lulu. *Henry can't be in love, this can't be happening. He wouldn't do this.*

"You know nothing of him, and this is nothing more than scandalous gossip," Matilda finished.

"Scandal it may be, but Agatha isn't wrong. They are engaged," Julia

said. Matilda looked at her keenly and Julia didn't shy away. Maybe Julia could sense the disbelief and rage behind Matilda's stare because she added softly: "Althea has written to tell me."

Matilda knew Althea would never lie about her brother's prospects. *It's really true. It's happening. He's marrying someone. Someone else.*

"It will be a good opportunity for her," Lulu commented. "A relative's wedding is always a superior chance to find a match. She is out this season, is she not?"

"She is," Julia nodded, "and looking to be wed as soon as possible, I understand."

"Much like the rest of us," Lulu said. "Well, except Lady Wynter here."

Matilda held back her barely controlled temper.

"I cannot imagine how my marital status is any of your business," Matilda snapped.

"Well, it is everyone's business." Lulu smirked. "As you have so frequently boasted, you are in the remarkable position of potential heir to a duchy. Who Lady Wynter finally deigns to marry will be the talk of society. You have been out for two seasons now, have you not?"

"I have." Matilda gritted her teeth. "What of it?"

"Nothing of note." Lulu eyes glimmered. "Only that the older a lady gets, the more seasons that pass, the less likely she is to find her match. Even a lady with your titles might struggle."

Matilda heard the collected intake of both Julia and Agatha at Lulu's heavy-laden insult. Matilda knew she was gaining a reputation as an oddity, just as Barty had noted, she was eccentric, but this was the first time she had felt the stinging scorn of society at her lack of suitor. If she hadn't been so overwhelmed by the news of Henry's engagement, perhaps she would be able to control her emotions better, but as it was, Matilda found herself pushing back her chair and standing up, glaring down at Lulu.

“I would thank you for your warning if it meant anything to me, but sadly it does not,” Matilda said coldly. “I occupy a similar position that Lord Linfield has been known to espouse marriage is a contract designed to enslave free spirits, and if one is in the position to avoid it, one should at all costs.”

Agatha shrank from her tone, Julia looked down at the table, but Lulu was clearly undeterred.

“And look how well it has worked out for him,” Lulu said. “For whatever he thought before he shall be wed in two weeks’ time. It seems you cannot trust the word of Lord Linfield.”

Matilda could not hold back her distaste.

“Whatever decisions Lord Linfield has taken with regards to his future, it in no way leads me disregard his word.” Matilda glared down at Lulu with unmitigated dislike. “In fact, I would trust his word until the day I died, which is more than anyone can say for you, cousin.”

Matilda turned away from Lulu’s frustrated face and nodded politely to a shell-shocked Agatha and a slightly flustered looking Julia.

“Good day, ladies.”

“Matilda, wait!”

She heard Julia pushing back her chair to come after her, but Matilda was not in the mood to wait. She hitched up her skirts, not caring if it was unladylike, and ran through the house to find her horse. Henry Linfield was getting married. She needed to be alone. Only then would she allow herself to feel the full desolation of her broken heart.

Chapter Five

“Are you excited about next year?” Matilda asked, swinging her legs down from the tree house. She and Henry sat on the edge, looking down towards the brook where Althea and Julia were playing with a five-year-old Barty in the water. They were fishing for tadpoles whilst Henry and Matilda read books in the tree house. It was one of their idyllic summers - Henry was home from Oxford and Matilda, Althea, Julia and Barty were able to enjoy his company nearly every day on the Sinclair estate.

“I am.” Henry smiled, his back resting against the tree. The book he was reading lay open in his lap, his shirt sleeves rolled up to reveal his delicate wrists and strong hands. “I’m looking forward to the adventure.”

Henry has been at Oxford a year. In six months, he would be off on the Grand Tour, exploring Europe with a tutor in tow whilst Matilda would be in the midst of her final preparations before she was launched into society. She couldn’t help the envy that rose up inside of her when she thought of the excitement that awaited him compared to the endless dancing and socialising with the same faces that awaited her.

“Will you go to Rome?” Matilda lifted her book up, showing Henry a drawing inside. “Will you see this place?”

“That is the Forum.” Henry leaned closer to look at it. “I imagine I shall, yes.”

“It’s so unfair,” Matilda moaned, stroking the picture of the large pillars, and imagining the golden sunshine bouncing off the creamy stone. “You shall see it all in the flesh and I must simply imagine it all. You get to have all the adventures.”

“Hey, don’t be dense.” Henry poked her in the shoulder with the spine of his book and jerked his head, compelling her to shuffle backwards, leaning

her back against the tree with him. "You'll get to see it one day."

"It might have crumbled away by then," Matilda grumbled.

"It's stood that way for centuries, Tills!" Henry laughed, nudging her shoulder with his, making her stomach flip with excitement. "It can wait a few more years for you to see it."

"Maybe." Matilda tried not to blush at the familiar nickname and leaned her head back against the warm bark of the tree. "Will you paint it for me?"

"You have a picture right here." Henry tapped her book.

"It's not the same." Matilda looked at him pleadingly. "Please? Paint it for me? Then you can come back and give it to me at my ball."

"Ah yes, the inaugural ball." Henry wiggled his eyebrows. "The great launching of Tills Wynter onto society. You'll have gentlemen falling at your feet to dance the night away."

"Don't!" Matilda groaned, pushing him whilst he laughed at her. "I can't bear it. All those people looking at me. I can't think of anything worse."

"There are many worse things than being eligible and fortunate, Tills." He chuckled. "You'll do fine. Someone will sweep you off your feet and then your husband can take you to Rome. How does that sound?"

Matilda tried to hide her blush, hoping the sunburn she'd unwittingly got that day would cover it. In the year Henry had spent in Oxford he had become even more proficient in the art of flirting. Matilda had noticed how some of the easy innocence of her former friend had now hardened like a diamond into the dazzling seventeen-year-old Lord who sat beside her. It made it so much harder to subdue her feelings. Even the months of silence between them, hearing stories of his nefarious and scandalous exploits at Oxford from Althea, had not dimmed her affection for him. If anything, it had grown.

"What about you?" Matilda asked shyly, staring down her book. "Will you marry? Eventually?"

"I doubt it," he said lightly, crushing her hopes with three words.

"Oh?" Matilda's throat was dry, and she watched him carefully.

"You know I've never gone in for that sort of thing." His head rested lazily against the tree bark, his blonde curls golden in the summer light as it shafted through the tree above. "I think I'd be much happier exploring and having fun...All I've ever wanted is to be free to live and act as I please. Let Althea be the one to have a big family. I can be the adventuring Uncle, telling scary stories to my nieces and nephews by the fire."

He grinned at her lazily, his green eyes as bright as the leafy foliage around him.

"What do you think?"

"I think that sounds good," Matilda said, swallowing hard. "I don't have much of a desire to be married either. I want to be an adventurer too."

"Well, I guess we can be unmarried and adventurous together then, Tills." Henry chuckled, turning back to his book.

"Do you promise?" Matilda asked, her heart in her throat. If he said it, it would be enough for her.

"Yeah, I promise." Henry laughed, reaching a hand up to ruffle her hair.

"I promise, too." Matilda giggled.

Matilda's heart swelled with love and affection as she watched him turn back to his book. She knew then, at fifteen, that he didn't feel as she did, but it was enough for now. By next year, they would be dancing together at her ball. He would give her his painting. Things might be different then. Even if they weren't, it was still enough. If Henry would still be her friend and never married anyone else, that would be enough. She could wait for him. She would wait.

It had not been enough. Matilda's head was full of the heavy, summery memory as she rode Shakespeare home from Julia's house, letting her angry tears blow away in the wind. She had waited and waited and what had it got her? Only heartbreak.

"Damn," she whispered to herself. "Damn it."

She instinctively nudged Shakespeare to ride through the woods, slowing down on the uneven stony path. Without meaning to, she allowed Shakespeare to wend his way from the path and make his way to the brook, the horse eagerly bending his damp, sweaty neck to lap at the running water. Matilda was unable to stop her eyes from lifting to find the ledge of the tree house, hidden in the trees above the brook. Her tears trailed down her cheeks, dripping down into the fabric of her dress and Shakespeare's mane. The horse snorted and Matilda rubbed his neck affectionately.

"Oh, Shakespeare, it's all my fault, isn't it?" Matilda sniffled miserably. "I believed him when he promised. More fool me for believing him."

The horse huffed, almost sympathetically, and Matilda dismounted, tangling her cold fingers into his dark mane as she leaned her face into his warm neck, nuzzling softly.

"He never came to my ball," she whispered sadly, her words vanishing into Shakespeare's musky, chestnut hair. "He never painted me my picture. Why did I ever think that he would have kept this promise too?"

Shakespeare gave no answer, simply ducking his head down to graze on some watercress on the riverbank. Matilda sighed and petted him affectionately, slumping down to sit on a felled log by the brook. She pushed her hands into her dark hair, trying to tease out the tangles that had built up there in the windy ride.

When Henry had gone back to Oxford that summer, she had never seen him again. Despite hearing nothing from him since he had left for the Grand Tour, Althea had assured him that he would return in time for her coming out ball. He had not. He had stayed in Europe for another year, and had, from all of Althea and Julia's accounts, only returned to England six months ago to continue his rolling tour of debauchery and bachelor excitements in London. Yet still Matilda had carried her torch for him. Still, she had held onto his promise that he would never marry. There had been a strange, invisible camaraderie in knowing that he was out there, somewhere in the world, keeping his promise just as she was keeping hers. She had thought that would be enough. Now, with the painful news of his engagement to some strange, potentially ruined girl marching through her head like a drumbeat, she knew that had been youthful madness.

“Matilda!”

She turned to see two horses and riders on the path above her and instantly recognised their silhouettes. She groaned. One was Holton, her father’s right-hand man. The other was Ralph Wynter, the Duke of Sinclair; her father.

“Are you alright, my lady?” Holton called down, staying atop his steed as her father dismounted beside him, shoving the reigns of his horse into Holton’s hands. “Are you hurt at all?”

“Of course not, I’m fine,” Matilda said, watching warily as her father stalked down the bank towards her, his face a picture of wrath.

“Excellent news, it’s not as if we are particularly sensitive as a family to times when you disappear on a horse,” Ralph snapped, his greying hair ruffled around his face.

“I’ll remind you that I have not fallen from a horse in nine years.” Matilda rolled her eyes.

“And I’ll remind you that a near drowning is not an experience a father simply forgets.” Her father’s eyes flashed dangerously. He had always been protective of her. As she had become a young woman, she had felt the tightening hand on her leading strings and been pulling against them. There was more tension in their relationship now than there ever had been, and Matilda struggled not to rise to his anger.

“I wasn’t anywhere near the lake.” Matilda crossed her arms defensively. “I rode to Julia’s house for tea with the ladies, where is the danger in that?”

“Eligible ladies do not go riding to tea parties alone.” Her father clenched his teeth. “They take a chaperone or a groom with them —”

“I am expected to endure a chaperone for a ride that I have been doing since I was a girl?” Matilda demanded. “A ride to my friend’s house? Do I need such supervision? Am I a child?”

“No, you are not,” Ralph said, his voice rising. “You are a young unmarried lady and as such you are under the careful eye of society and as my daughter you are under even closer scrutiny. You must

behave appropriately.”

“I will not be caged, father,” Matilda said, her own tone becoming low and dangerous, unconsciously mimicking the way she had heard Frances responding to her father’s anger. “I am Lady Wynter, surely that counts for something? Surely it affords me some freedoms?”

“Yes, you are a lady, and it is high time you acted like it,” he retorted. “You know how important it is for us to create a strong alliance to support our family, to support Bartholomew —.”

“Barty is fine!” Matilda exclaimed. “He will be fine! Nothing terrible shall happen to him!”

“And if it did?” he demanded sharply. “What if tragedy struck, and a terrible ague were to take your mother and I, and your brother? What would happen to you then, the newly made Duchess of Sinclair, alone in the world?”

“I would be fine.” Matilda swallowed hard. She was already emotional from the revelations of the tea party, the dark and vexing picture of tragedy that her father was painting was enough to push her over the edge. “I would have Holton, Mrs Bury ...”

“And they would be able to defend you, would they? From your cousin, a man with a Rothschild fortune at his disposal, who would be the only natural heir to the dukedom if you were gone?” Ralph countered, his dark eyes shining with a pressing need. Matilda recognised it instantly. Her father didn’t want to hurt her, but he hated her casual attitude. He was trying to scare her. She resented him for it. She took a deep breath and tried not to show how frightening she found it when he spoke like this.

“Cousin Philip has no interest in me or our family,” she said coldly. “He has enough money as he is.”

“Can such a man ever see an end to his own greed?” Ralph said angrily. Even though her Aunt had been sent to the Americas and her cousin had been living on the continent for years, Matilda knew that the legacy of her Aunt’s betrayal cast a long shadow. “A man whose mother tried to kill me, tried to kill your own Mama to take hold of what was ours? Do you not, for one moment, imagine that having a husband by your side and a family to support you might protect you

from danger?"

"But none of that is going to happen!" Matilda shouted, unable to hold back her fury. "This is all conjecture, all dependent on every single person I love abandoning me! This is the premise from which you want me to find a match and be married?"

"I want you to be safe," Ralph said. Matilda could see a vein in his temple throbbing. He was clearly fighting his own instinct to shout back. "I want you to live up to your title and the expectations of our rank and position. You could start by turning up to meetings I arrange for you."

"He was twenty years older than me!" Matilda yelled in frustration. "That's the best you can do for me?"

"You have been out in society for two seasons, and you have resisted every eligible lord, baron, heir and gentleman you've been introduced to!" Ralph shouted back. Matilda knew she had hit a nerve. "I could bring you a prince and you would still refuse to show up to meet him! Lord in heaven, Matilda, why do you insist on sabotaging every potential match you are presented with?"

Matilda couldn't answer. She couldn't stop her eyes from brimming with unshed tears. She bit the inside of her lip and stared at her father, refusing to bow to his expectant gaze. There was only one answer to that question: Henry. It was the one thing she could never tell her father, never tell anyone. The silence stretched between them until finally her father threw up his hands in irritation.

"I will do my best for you, Matilda," he said, his voice suddenly hoarse with emotion. "If you will let me."

Matilda wished she could run into her father's arms and give him the comfort she so desperately needed too, but she felt like she was made of stone. She couldn't move. It was like the news of Henry's engagement and now her fight with her father was filling her blood with ice. She watched Ralph climb back up the bank and re-mount his horse.

"Come back to the house," Ralph said tersely. "Your mother is worried and Barty wishes to show you a painting her has done in your absence."

“Is the viscount still there?” Matilda asked tightly.

“He is not.” Ralph’s eyebrows twitched. “So, you are free to return unencumbered.”

“For now,” Matilda muttered.

Ralph pretended he had not heard. Instead, he turned to Holton.

“Escort her back.” He looked down at Matilda, jaw tense. “You should get used to travelling with an escort. This behaviour will no longer be tolerated.”

With that, Ralph spurred his great horse with admirable dexterity and strength for a man of his age, and galloped away down the path. Matilda let out a long sigh and rested her forehead against Shakespeare’s flank, groaning in irritation. Shakespeare tossed his head in surprise at the sound and Matilda turned away, picking up a stone and throwing it into the stream with all her might, letting her rage flow out as the water splashed. How she wished everything was different! It was not every day that she wished she was not the daughter of the Duke of Sinclair, but this was one of them.

“Come, my lady.” Holton had dismounted and walked down to catch Shakespeare’s reigns. He smiled down at Matilda with comforting familiarity. He was used to witnessing her rage and sadness since she was a little girl. “Let us walk back together.”

Matilda nodded, taking Shakespeare’s reigns back from him and together they silently took the path back to the house, their horses hooves clapping the only sound between them. Holton could always do this for Matilda. He had been a steady friend, almost like a kind uncle, for her whole life.

“He thinks the worst is always coming,” Matilda muttered eventually once Holton’s presence had calmed her down enough to speak.

“Your father has experienced much tragedy,” Holton said.

“Is that an excuse for forcing a marriage on me?” Matilda asked bleakly.

“You truly wish to spend your entire life alone?” Holton asked softly. If her father had said it she would have risen to it, but when Holton said it she only heard the genuine curiosity of a man who had spent his whole life in the service of her family.

No, I want to spend it with Henry, she thought angrily, but he’s going to spend it with someone else, despite what he said.

“Henry Linfield is getting married,” Matilda blurted out. Holton didn’t respond for a moment and they walked further in silence.

“That is surprising,” he said finally, not questioning the change in topic. He never did.

“It is, isn’t it?” Matilda sighed. “I read every scandal sheet, every announcement, Mama catches whiffs of gossip from miles away and knows every society secret, and yet I had to hear it from Agatha Dawlish of all people —.”

“Who is the lucky lady?”

“Daphne Danforth.” Matilda couldn’t keep the distaste out of her voice. “A thoroughly unworthy candidate by anyone’s standards. By all accounts she is attached to someone else as well, so it makes one wonder why Henry would even consider...”

She let her words trail away, not wanting to let her words give too much of herself away.

“You are afraid of being trapped in an unhappy union, like Henry Linfield?” Holton asked gently. “Is that the reason for your resistance to your father’s matchmaking?”

“Other than the fact that he seems to think gentlemen twenty years my senior are appropriate suitors, yes.” Matilda sighed. “I suppose it is. Wait, you think Henry is trapped?”

She stopped walking, staring at Holton, his words hitting her properly.

“Do you know something about his wedding, Holton?”

“I couldn’t say, butlers code and all that,” Holton replied with a

twinkle in his eye, the kind he always had when he was keeping secrets. “But it doesn’t take an astronomer to see the sign in these stars. An eligible first son of a baron is engaged to a lady of little note, for whom he has no perceived attachment?” Holton wiggled his eyebrows. “Anyone can see that there are some machinations of honour between families to bring that match about.”

“Yes, I suppose they can,” Matilda said slowly, falling back into step beside him, her anger at Henry dissolving like mist. Her mind was filled with Henry’s words from their childhood: *I think I’d be much happier exploring and having fun...All I’ve ever wanted is to be free to live and act as I please.* How had she not seen it before? Of course, Henry was trapped! Hadn’t she promised him, only three years ago, that they would always be adventurous and unmarried? Wasn’t there an implication in that promise that they would protect one another from anything that threatened that?

“He deserves more,” Matilda muttered to herself, then, when Holton raised his eyebrows at her added: “Henry. He deserves more than an unhappy union.”

“He does.” Holton sighed. “But unfortunately, people are not always given the life they deserve. That is all your father is trying to do, my lady. Give you the life you deserve.”

“I know.”

Matilda appreciated Holton’s attempts at bringing around a rapprochement between her and her father, but she was thinking about Henry. He did deserve more. He deserved someone to fight for him, and to fight for the life he wanted. She knew what Henry wanted and it wasn’t to be married, least of all to a woman he didn’t love. Matilda was going to make sure he got what he deserved.

At least one of us should be free to live and act as we please, she thought resolutely. If it can’t be me, I will make damn sure it is him.

Chapter Six

“*H*enry! I can’t believe you are getting married!” Medea exclaimed, lurching herself forward to hug her older brother around the waist.

“Me neither,” Henry chuckled wryly, wrapping an arm around Medea’s small frame, and kissing the top of her head fondly. Like all of the Linfield children, Medea was blessed with the same golden hair as their mother, but hers was straight and silky. Stroking his youngest sister’s hair always reminded Henry of the day she was born, and he had held her in his arms. He hugged her even closer, enjoying her squeak of excitement as he did. “It’s good to see you, Dee Dee.”

“We’ve missed you when you’ve been in London,” Medea said, her voice muffled against his waistcoat. Henry knew she was hiding her emotions from him, perhaps overwhelmed to hear his affectionate pet name for her again after the many months he had been living in the city as a bachelor.

“I’ve missed you too,” Henry said fondly, watching affectionately as she pulled away, rubbing her nose.

“Clearly not enough,” Medea scowled. “Or you would have come home sooner. It’s been nearly six months since you came back from Europe, and you’ve been in London that whole time. What can you possibly be doing there?”

Henry opened his mouth, trying to think of an excuse that didn’t involve the words “gambling halls” and “ladies’ bedrooms” but was saved from it by a soft, lilting voice behind him.

“Gentlemen are not supposed to live at home when they are grown, Medea, you know that.”

They turned to see their sister, Althea, standing in the doorway of the music room, smiling at them both.

“Althea.” Henry looked his sister up and down. “You look well, sister.”

Medea was right, perhaps he had been away from their family home too long. When they had been younger, people had thought Althea and Henry were twins both of them blessed with golden hair and fair skin and the same, charming smile. Althea had grown up since the last time he had come home to the Foley estate. She was dressed in a simple blue gown that flattered her golden curls, the fluffy tendrils of hair framing her soft features, her golden-brown eyes smiling back at him. She looked every inch the perfect debutante.

“Welcome home, brother.” Althea smiled at him. “How pleasant to have your company.”

She spoke formally but Henry could see the glitter of a tease in her brown eyes.

“Don’t say that!” Medea whined. “You should scold him, make him come home more! He always listens to you.”

“Oh, I am well versed in how it is truly impossible to make Henry do anything he has set his mind against.” Althea smirked, leaning against the door frame. “Which is why his upcoming wedding is so thoroughly surprising.”

Henry’s stomach flipped but he made sure none of his tension appeared on his face. Althea was a smart young woman. Of course, she would have questions and no doubt their father had done nothing to answer them. Henry could not help but curse him inside his head.

“Very astute, sister,” Henry said. “We should discuss it further, once this one —” he reached down to ruffle Medea’s hair. “— has gone back to her governess.”

“Henry don’t!” Medea scolded, ducking away from him with a frown. “It’s not ladylike.”

“Oh, you have no need to concern yourself with what is ladylike yet.” Henry pinched her cheek affectionately.

“We are having her hems lowered next season,” Althea said, a gentle but firm reminder that Medea was no longer a little child.

“I can’t wait.” Medea smiled up at him with honest delight. “I shall have a long gown like Althea and dance at all the balls ...”

And need a husband found for you, Henry thought, miserably. Which shall fall to me to find, I am sure.

“Well, all of that is yet to come.” Henry patted her cheek, wishing for a brief moment that he could keep her safe and precious and away from the world. “You go to your governess. Let me talk with your sister.”

“All right.” Medea frowned grumpily, but pulled him down by his lapels to plant a sweet kiss on his cheek before running away, giggling like the little girl she still was at heart.

“She’s growing up so fast,” Henry murmured, watching his youngest sister run up the stairs. At fifteen years old, her figure was beginning to bloom. There was probably a young son of a gentleman somewhere who had his eye on her.

“She’s not the only one.”

Henry turned to look at Althea who assessed him with raised eyebrows.

“You’re getting married? *You?*”

“Let’s talk about it in here,” Henry said, taking her elbow and closing the music room door behind them. “I thought you would be happy for me.”

“I am! Of course, I am!” Althea grasped his hands and squeezed them familiarly, looking up at him with earnest eyes. “It’s all I have ever wanted for you Henry, to be happy and settled, starting your own family with someone you love —”

“Then what’s the problem?” Henry interrupted. Hearing Althea recount her dream for him which was so oppositional to what was actually taking place was too painful to hear.

"It is only...that I have heard things," Althea said slowly.

Henry resisted the urge to roll his eyes. His father truly had done a terrible job of making sure the secret of his new bride was closely guarded. No doubt Althea had heard stories from the gossip mill, just as Owen had done.

"Out with it." He sighed, folding his arms, and preparing himself to lie to his sister. "What have you heard?"

"Well, you remember Julia Watson?"

Henry nodded, recalling one of Althea's local childhood friends whom they had often played alongside on the largest local estate, the Sinclair Manor. Him, Althea, Medea, Julia, little Bartholomew and of course, Matilda Wynter, his childhood partner in crime in all their summery high jinks. The younger girl had followed him everywhere. He felt a pang of nostalgia for all the fun memories they had made. Oh, to be that carefree again!

"We correspond regularly and when I wrote of your engagement, she wrote back with some impressions of Miss Danforth." Althea was twisting her family ring, staring at her hands. "They were quite curious."

At least it's only about Miss Danforth and not father's terrible debts!

"You know you shouldn't gossip, Ally," Henry chided softly, sitting down on the piano stool.

"It's not gossip if it's about someone you love," Althea snapped, her eyes flashing. Henry was reminded of how much Althea cared for him and the knowledge made his compliance in this whole blasted marriage affair a little more bearable. He would do anything to secure her future.

"Thank you, Ally." Henry tugged her hand so she relaxed and sat heavily on the piano stool beside him. "Are you going to tell me what you've heard, or must I puzzle it out of you?"

Althea sighed and fingered the keys of the piano slowly. Without meaning to, Henry instinctively joined her. Together they briefly ran through the opening movement of a quiet duet that they had learned

as children. The familiar tune, the sensation of his dear sister beside him and her gentle, recognisable scent was endlessly calming. It seemed to be enough to finally prompt Althea to speak.

“She was attached, apparently, to the son of a viscount,” she said quietly. “Did you know?”

“That was a misunderstanding.”

“There is a rumour of a scandal, Henry, the viscount sent his son abroad!” Althea said, her tone serious. “You choose to marry a girl who has such connotations attached to her name?”

“It’s all a misunderstanding,” Henry repeated. “Whatever has happened in the past...I am going to marry Daphne.”

“But...do you like her, Henry?”

“Of course.” Henry tried not to blanch at the incisiveness of the question.

“Do you...do you love her?” Althea asked hesitantly.

“Not everyone makes a love match, Althea.” Henry sighed heavily, closing his eyes. “I like her enough.”

“Enough for what?”

“Enough to marry her.” Henry opened his eyes and smiled at his sister tenderly, weaving together her previously voiced hopes into his words to assure her. “Enough to begin the journey of marriage with her. It’s time, Althea, it’s time I was married, and I respect her enough. Enough to be happy.”

His words had done the trick. Althea’s eyes were brimming with happy tears and he knew he would have to endure some weeping and frivolous excitement.

“Oh, Henry.” She sniffed, squeezing his hand.

“There you are,” a familiar voice called from the library door. The Linfield siblings looked up to see their father, twisting his hands as he looked at his only son with what could only be described as

trepidation. "Might we have a word, Henry?"

"Of course," Henry said, unable to keep the cool tone out of his voice. He stood up and pressed a kiss to Althea's head as he passed. "I won't be a moment."

"I'll have tea brought to the morning room," Althea said, blowing her nose on a handkerchief. "We shall celebrate."

"Of course." Henry tried to make his smile as genuine as possible and watched his sister leave the room before turning his face towards his father and dropping his positive demeanour.

"What is it?"

"Come in." His father jerked his head towards the library, stepping back to allow Henry entrance. That in itself was unusual. His father dominated the library, he liked it kept a certain way and preferred his children did not spend time in it. Rather he encouraged them to take books out and away to their rooms than linger in the beautiful room and his presence. Henry watched as his father nervously moved around to the large desk, seating himself behind it and gesturing for Henry to take the seat in front of him. Henry dropped himself into it resentfully and stared at his father expectantly. He would not be the first one to speak.

"Who shall be your best man and stand up with you?" His father shuffled papers on his desk, refusing to meet his son's eye.

"Barton," Henry said shortly.

"Very good." His father looked up at him briefly. "Does Barton know?"

"I told him nothing," Henry replied. It was true. Owen had deduced the entire matter himself and likely other intelligent gentlemen with adequate information would do the same. His father did not seem to believe it was possible and Henry had no desire to enlighten him.

"That is for the best," his father spoke awkwardly. "I have been in discussion with Mr Danforth...he is content with all the arrangements made so far."

The thought of Mr Danforth and his father huddled together, concocting a wedding like sorcerers over a cauldron, flared Henry's resentment.

"And the lady?" he snapped. "Is she content?"

"She is...grateful to be avoiding scandal," his father said, averting his eyes again. "She is also not a young lady so a match of any kind at this stage..."

"Yes, all right," Henry grimaced. He didn't want to be reminded that his future bride was four years his senior. Henry stood up, no longer wanting to continue the discussion. "Will that be all?"

"No."

Henry stood, looking down at the man who was the cause of all his present misery, waiting for him to speak. Finally, his father sighed and set down his papers.

"Henry, I appreciate what you are doing for me." His father rubbed a hand over his face. "I'll be honest, I had half a hope that the notorious viscount would cave under the pressure of his son and there would be no need for a wedding at all..." Henry tried to swallow his disdain as his father looked up at him with pleading eyes. "I never wished this for you, Henry, I swear it. But I am grateful."

For the first time, his father really looked into his face. Henry saw the heavy lines of worry and regret etched into Baron Foley's countenance. That was the most painful thing, Henry found. His father's regret was always real, but he only felt it when the consequences of his bad behaviour were brought to his door. Regret was never enough to stop him.

"Don't be grateful, I'm doing it for Althea and Medea, not for you," Henry said, folding his arms. "But understand this, father. As soon as I am wed, I am taking control and responsibility for the dowries of both of them. I will not put their future at risk, not after the sacrifice I am making."

Baron Foley stared up at his son, eyes slightly wet. Henry had expected some resistance to his comment so was surprised when his father merely nodded meekly.

“I am sorrowful that you feel it is necessary, my son, but if you insist —”

“I do, I have already arranged it. The funds will be completely under my control and you shall not have access to them. You will not gamble away their futures too. That is final.” Henry cut over him, uncaring for the way his father winced at his hard tone. He did not have space inside him for sympathy for his father right now. There was too much rage, too much disappointment. How did it help him if his father was regretful or sorry? It changed nothing. In two weeks’ time he would still be wed. The price still needed to be paid, and it fell to Henry to pay it. The cost was his future happiness.

“I understand.” His father nodded slowly. “I accept and I hope, that in time, you might be happy with your new wife. That you will be blessed with children and joy and eventually...you might come to forgive me.”

Henry’s anger flared up and he was unable to stop his cold retort.

“That will be a cold day indeed,” he said, turning and walking to the door. “Is that all, father?”

“You have such a hard opinion of me, son, but it was not so long ago that your mother was kept up at night by the worry that you would ruin some girl or other and we would be planning a wedding in much the same circumstances as this.” His father’s voice was taut. Henry could tell he was holding back his deepest anger and was not grateful for it.

“So I have sowed some wild oats in my time, what is your point?” Henry glared at him.

“My point is that I half expected you to flee the country rather than stand by your family. You’ve clearly changed, matured. You are a true man of honour.” His father smiled tightly. “If you can change, perhaps there is hope in my future too.”

“I never changed, Father!” Henry snapped. “I would always protect my sisters. Just as you have always gambled with more than the coin in your pocket. Some things never change.”

He watched the hard words land with his father, watched the old

man's face close off, the veil of the façade of a baron falling over his features. Henry didn't care. It was easier to deal with this version of his father, the cold, calculating man trying to protect a reputation rather than the weepy, regretful father pestering him for forgiveness. Baron Foley turned back to his papers.

"Your wedding banns are to be read in church this Sunday," he said. "The Danforth's will be there. I trust you will be also?"

Henry smirked humourlessly. The notion that this was a question and not a command was laughable.

"Of course, father," he said sarcastically. "I can hardly wait."

Chapter Seven

“*I*s that her?” Medea hissed beside Henry as the Linfield family strolled up the hill to the local church. “Is that Miss Danforth?”

“Yes, walk like a lady, Medea,” Althea hissed back, tugging Medea’s hand to stop her from running to match Henry’s long steps. “Miss Danforth and Mr Danforth and Mrs Danforth, I believe.”

The Danforth party stood waiting outside the Church, watching the little family led by Henry walk towards them. Henry’s stomach was sour with dread. He wished they were walking in the other direction.

“Oh. The one in the blue? That’s her?” Medea’s eyes widened and she said nothing. “She’s ... she’s ...”

“She’s pretty,” Althea said hesitantly.

Henry understood her reticence. Looking at his future bride from far away, he could see that there was nothing wrong with her, but she was not a beauty. She had nice enough features; dark blonde hair, a comely figure, pale blue eyes, and that appealing blush-pink quality of skin that reminded Henry of a milkmaid and many gentlemen found alluring. Yet there was nothing about her that he found compelling. If he met her at a ball or the opera, he would not look twice at her, and now he was going to marry her. For the life of him, Henry could not fathom how such a girl had charmed her way in with the son of a viscount. She hardly had the face that launched a thousand ships.

“She’s very fair,” their father said behind them. “She will bear fine children.”

Henry rolled his eyes, glad his father could not see his face. Of course, that’s all he and Mr Danforth were considering. In lieu of his debts

being paid, Mr Danforth would be counting on his daughter producing a future baron.

“She’s...homely looking.” Medea wrinkled her nose. “She’s not nearly as beautiful as Ally, or Lady Julia, or Lady Wynter —”

“That’s enough,” Althea hushed, squeezing her little sister’s hand. They had reached the Danforth company. Henry hung back as introductions were made. He noticed how Daphne avoided his eye and looked at both of his sisters warily. She eyed their fine gowns and delicate features and Henry thought he saw a little souring around her mouth. Medea had been right, Daphne was not as beautiful as Althea or Medea herself, for she had none of their natural grace or beauty. He was surprised a little by the resentment he saw flickering in his future bride’s eyes. That could make things awkward. Even if he was marrying her, he would never take her side over his sisters.

“Henry,” his father called him forward just as Daphne was directed by her stern looking father to stand by his side. “You should escort Miss Danforth into the church.”

“Of course,” Henry said, trying not to feel like he was nothing more than a puppet on a string. He smiled at Mr Danforth, receiving nothing more than a dour nod. Henry felt as if when Mr Danforth looked at him, he only saw pounds and shillings.

“Miss Danforth?” Henry offered his arm to Daphne, who took it, eagerly. He noticed the shimmer of pride in her pale eyes.

“Thank you, Lord Linfield,” she said softly, dipping her head down demurely and fluttering her eyelashes. When she looked up he saw a hint of seduction in her plain face.

Ah ha, Henry thought darkly, that’s how you got him.

Mr Danforth had been falling over himself to insist that, although an indiscretion had taken place, it was entirely the fault of the young gentleman involved. He had told both Henry and his father that his daughter was innocent, but Henry did not see innocence in his future wife’s face. He saw the familiar teasing look of a woman who thought she knew how to manipulate a man.

“How are you, Miss Danforth?” Henry asked politely, as all of the

heads of the congregation turned to watch them walk in.

"Quite well, my lord," Daphne replied, standing a little straighter and preening slightly under the watchful eyes. Henry felt a twist of dislike.

"I hear the viscount's son has fled these shores," Henry said lowly, once they were seated beside one another in a pew, ignoring the glances of the curious congregation around them. He noticed the way her nostrils flared at his words, but she kept her composure.

"Oh yes," she whispered, her voice unexpectedly tremulous coming from such a rigid body. "I am grateful never to see that brute again. Thank you, dear Lord Linfield, for rescuing me from such a man."

Though her words and tone were sincere, her eyes were cold. He noticed the tightness in her jaw, the slight flicker of her eyes as she could not quite meet his gaze. He didn't believe a word she said.

"Indeed," Henry murmured back. "You will be glad, then, that your father was unsuccessful in making a match with the viscount? I had thought you had a preference for him?"

"Not at all." She shook her head firmly. "He was quite indecent. When Papa suggested I marry him, I was quite expectant to be unhappy forever, but instead, I get you."

She looked up at him with what she probably thought was a besotted, doting expression but it made Henry's skin crawl. He knew what real admiration looked like and it wasn't this. For some reason, the face of his old friend, Lady Wynter, popped into his head. He remembered her broad smile, her glittering eyes, the way they followed him eagerly on all of their adventures as if he were the most exciting man in existence. That was true admiration, even if it were only between friends.

"Well, I am glad to be of service," Henry replied, turning his face towards the front of the church, where the Priest was making preparations to read the banns of marriage. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Daphne's satisfied smirk, the confident tilt of her head. That was the face of a woman who had got exactly what she wanted, not a lady despairing for a lost lover or even a lady flushed with relief to be excused from an unfortunate match. For the first time, Henry wondered if this whole thing was a scheme of Daphne's making. She

was a twenty-four-year-old woman with no prospects. Had her dalliance with the viscount been just one avenue of her attempts to seduce her way into a better future? Was Henry nearly the next, alternative step when that avenue failed?

I am no more than a means to an end.

“Let us pray,” the Priest intoned, and the congregation obediently bowed their heads. Henry took a moment to glance at his future bride and saw her head bowed and lips pursed in the perfect vision of obedience. Her lack of authenticity was bewildering and distasteful.

All of this would be bearable if she was bearable, but I fear she’s a beast and I shall be stuck with her forever.

On his other side, Althea elbowed him, raising one blonde eyebrow in curiosity. Some of his turmoil must have shown on his face. He smiled down at her tightly. For Althea. All of this was for Althea and Medea. If there was anything that could compel him to do this terrible thing, it was surely them. Yet as the words of the Lord’s prayer rushed over him, Henry found his mind snagged on a particular line: *deliver us from evil*. Henry Linfield was not known for being especially spiritual, but he couldn’t help himself from raising his eyes to the stained-glass window behind the priest and letting the plea of his heart come forth.

Oh God, don’t make me do this. If I truly have to marry, at least let it be someone who’s company I will enjoy.

“I now publish the banns of marriage between Lord Henry Linfield of this parish and Miss Daphne Danforth of this parish....” The Priest began. Henry’s heart sped up.

I’d do anything for my sisters, anything, but please don’t make me do this. Find another way, I beg you, any other way to save my family.

“... If anyone knows of any lawful impediment why these two may not lawfully be joined marriage, they are to declare it now.”

The words rang forth. There was silence in the church. Beside him, Daphne was tense, watchful. Henry closed his eyes. There would be no saviour for him, no rescue from this circumstance. He would do what he must.

Oh God, please.

Suddenly, a voice rang forth from the back of the church.

“I declare the existence of an impediment.”

A collected gasp rose up from the congregation. Henry turned around so fast he thought he had hurt his neck. In the dark of the back of the church he could see no one, only shadows and a shape moving. His heart was racing so fast he could taste it. Was it the viscount's son, returned from France? Had he come back to claim Daphne? *Please God, let it be so.*

“Who declares the existence of an impediment?” The Priest demanded.

“Yes, who are you?” Mr Danforth scowled, jumping to his feet. “Why do you disrupt this legal process?”

“I do not need to declare myself,” the voice continued, and Henry realised with a stutter of his heart that it was a woman speaking. “The law only requires that the existence of an impediment be made known.”

“Poppycock!” Mr Danforth slammed his hand on the edge of the pew loudly. “Who are you?”

“No, our visitor is correct,” the Priest stammered. “I am only legally required to find out what the nature of the impediment is.”

“There is no impediment!” Mr Danforth shouted, eyes bulging. “My daughter is free to be wed!”

If there was ever any doubt in Henry's mind that Daphne Danforth had been taken to the bed of the son of the viscount, it quickly dissolved. No father would be so defensive of his daughter's honour and do it so vocally if it was truly unimpeachable.

“Oh, my goodness,” Althea whispered next to him, “what's going on?”

“I have no idea,” Henry answered honestly, turning to look at his father but before he could ask if his father if he had any inkling of the situation, the hidden woman spoke again.

“The impediment is not Miss Danforth’s,” she said, her deep tones carrying easily up into the vaulted ceiling. “It is Lord Linfield’s.”

There was another collected gasp as all eyes swivelled from the shadowed woman back towards him.

“Henry?” Althea whispered worriedly.

“What is the meaning of this?” Daphne hissed, glaring at him furiously.

“I don’t —,” Henry began, but before he could finish the Priest spoke again.

“You are yet to name the impediment, stranger.” The Priest was squinting into the darkness, but Henry knew he would not be able to see any more than the congregation. All that could be made out was the hood of a dark blue cloak. “Will you do so and let us decide if the banns read are unlawful?”

“Oh, they most certainly are,” the woman said. “Unless you wish to make Lord Linfield a bigamist. He is already married.”

“What?” Mr Danforth shouted, turning to him with a furious glare. “What in God’s name have you done?”

“Sir, please!” The Priest cried out and immediately the church was in uproar. Henry felt Althea grab his hand tightly, sensed Daphne screaming beside him, ringing shrieks of disbelief, and watched his father and Mr Danforth begin to shout at one another as if the world were suddenly moving very slowly around him. All Henry could do was watch the silhouette of the woman leaving the Church, even as she ran from those who chased her, he felt a strange lightness taking over his body.

Thank you.

“You!” Mr Danforth’s loud voice shocked Henry back into his body. The older man had grabbed him by the lapels and was manhandling him out into the aisle. “You will pay for what you’ve done here today!”

Mr Danforth let him go roughly and Henry stumbled, dazed, against the pews. Behind him, Henry could hear his sister's shouts of dismay, could feel them struggling to help him but he held up his hand behind him in warning, instinctively keeping them behind him as he faced Mr Danforth. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Daphne and her mother already walking away down the aisle without a backwards glance. If anything assured him that for Daphne, he was nothing more than a means to an end, it was this. Just as before, she was running from scandal, leaving her father to deal with the mess of it. Henry needed to do the same.

"Outside," Henry demanded, grabbing the older man's shoulder, and marching him down the aisle and out of the Church, away from the pressing eyes. Daphne and her mother were already waiting by their coach.

"You have to save this!" Baron Foley said in a panicked whisper, hurrying to catch up with his son. "You have to!"

"I am trying!" Henry snapped, even though he dearly wished he wasn't. He turned to Mr Danforth, who, although shorter than Henry, looked like he was about ready to punch him in the face.

"You humiliated me and my family today," Mr Danforth growled. "You will pay for it, mark my words."

"It's a lie," Henry said vehemently. "I have done nothing. We are both victims of a terrible slander here."

"You expect me to believe that?" Mr Danforth laughed nastily. He turned to Henry's father, a sneer on his face. "I asked you, I explicitly asked you if this was going to be a problem and you said there were no attachments."

"I didn't know." His father looked at him, crestfallen. "He didn't tell me."

"There was nothing to tell!" Henry exclaimed. "Whoever she is, she's lying! Perhaps she's angry with me or a jilted lover, but I am *not* married."

"It matters not," Mr Danforth sneered. "I chose you to manoeuvre my daughter away from scandal, not towards it. This marriage is over."

“No!” Henry’s father jerked forward. “Mr Danforth please —”

“You can expect to see my creditors in the next week, the debt still stands and since you can no longer offer me your son for my daughter to settle it, the account shall be paid in full,” Mr Danforth said, glaring at Henry’s father in disgust. “Your family will be ruined, your daughters will never find matches, your name will be mud and it’s all thanks...” Mr Danforth’s glare settled on Henry. “...to your philandering son.”

“Henry?”

Althea and Medea stood behind he and his father. Both of the girls were looking at their father and brother in dismay. Behind them, the gossip chatter inside the Church was growing. At least a hundred people all telling the story of how Henry Linfield had tried to take a bride when he already had one. All of them going home to households where they would share the delicious gossip over their Sunday dinners and soon, all of the Ton would know that Henry Linfield was a rake, through and through, and his family was diminished. The tiny whisper of thankfulness he had heard when he first saw the woman vanished entirely. Now he only felt rage towards her. Who was this impudent wench that had ruined the prospects of his sisters? He cared not a whit what society said of him, but he couldn’t stand to hurt them too.

“What have you done to us, son?” his father whispered in a broken voice.

“What have *I* done?” Henry shouted, unable to keep back his anger. “What have *I* done?”

He stared at his father, taking deep ragged breaths but the old man said nothing. Henry snorted and shook his head, turning away.

“Come on,” he muttered, reaching forward to grab both of his sister’s hands, tugging them away down the hill and back through the woods towards their estate, leaving his father alone.

“Henry,” Althea whispered, her eyes filled with tears as they hurried gratefully into the dense woodland. “What Mr Danforth said —”

“Not now, Ally,” Henry warned, breathing heavily as he kept a quick pace. They had to get home. He had to get them both home now. Only

then could he explain. Only then could he try and fix it.

“But who was she?” Medea cried out, stumbling as Henry dragged her along. “Why did she do that? Why did she ruin everything?”

“I don’t know,” Henry said, grimly. “But trust me, I intend to find out.”

Chapter Eight

What have you done? What have you done? What have you done?

The words galloped around Matilda's head as Shakespeare cantered over the fields, huffing, and panting as she pushed the horse to his limit, but she could not stop. She needed to put as much distance between herself and the church at the edge of the Linfield estate. She tossed back her dark blue hood, letting the chilling wind cool down her hot face. Even though she had hidden her features in the darkness of the church, it hadn't stopped her from being able to see the faces in the crowd of the congregation. Henry had stood out to her like a dark spectre in a light room. The three years since she had last seen him had only made him more handsome, despite the confounded look on his face as he spoke. His blonde hair caught in the light coming in through the stained-glass window and even from the back of the church, she could see his glorious green eyes shining like emeralds. She had thought she was doing the right thing. She had felt the words leaving her lips before she could really consider them, but then she had seen the look on his sister's faces. Althea, one of her oldest friends, was staring at her with utter confusion, tears in her eyes. The message behind them was as clear as a sunrise on a clear day: *Why are you doing this to him? Why are you doing this to us? Why are you hurting my family?*

Matilda had reeled away from that look, but also from the gentlemen jumping up at the back of the church, moving towards her with every intent of forestalling her escape. She had fled, jumping on Shakespeare's back and riding as fast as she could back over the fields towards the Sinclair estate, trying to get as far away from the church, her crime, and the pain in her friends' eyes as possible.

"I did the right thing," Matilda panted, reigning Shakespeare in as they came to the inn on the hillside leading down to the estate,

allowing the tired horse to lap at the water trough. She patted his neck, trying to settle her nerves and her own racing heart rate. "I did the right thing, didn't I, Shakespeare?"

Her equine companion merely snorted, blowing bubbles in the water. Matilda looked over her shoulder carefully, but she knew that she was a strong enough rider that no one would have been fast enough to follow her. Still, she couldn't help the trembling of her hands against the reins. She couldn't help being afraid. She had always had a bit of recklessness in her, it was something her father had despaired of ever since she had sneaked out early to ride her pony and had been thrown into the pond. Matilda could still remember the water closing over her head, the weight of her dress pulling her down towards the reeds. In those terrifying seconds when her breath was tight in her lungs, before Frances' strong hands pulled her away from death, Matilda had known one thing for sure: *I've gone too far*. Now, sitting on Shakespeare, a soft drizzle of rain falling on her face, Matilda was assaulted by the same feeling.

"Oh God, Shakespeare," she groaned and pressed her face against the horse's neck. "What have I done?"

She had seen the face of Daphne Danforth in the church. She had seen the calculating look in her eyes as she looked at her supposed future husband, and Matilda had known that she was nowhere near good enough for her Henry. *Her Henry*. She had been thinking of him that way for so long, had raced to the church when she had been told that morning that banns were being read, determined to save him from an unhappy fate, but when she had seen Althea's face guilt had hit her in the pit of her stomach. What she had done hadn't only protected Henry from an unhappy marriage. It would have other effects. She remembered then what Holton had said to her on the morning she had been thrown into the pond.

"Daddy is angry with me!" Matilda had coughed as Holton rode her back up to the house, trembling and chilled from the pond water.

"He is not angry," Holton had said quietly, his warm arms wrapped tightly around her small body. "He is only scared of losing you."

"I didn't mean to scare him," Matilda had whimpered feebly. "I only wanted to the jump the pony ..."

"I know, little one," Holton said gravely. "But our actions have consequences that can hurt others, even jumping ponies."

Matilda moaned again, the memory of those words hitting her with full force as she tried to get Althea's crushed expression out of her mind.

"I did it for Henry," she whispered, rubbing her nose against Shakespeare's damp mane. "I did it for his happiness, for his future..."

Or did you do it for yourself? Because you couldn't bear to see him married to anyone else?

"Miss? Can I help you?"

Matilda looked up and saw the innkeeper standing at the door of the inn, raising his hand to his brow to peer out at her. Matilda hastily pulled her hood over her face, feeling a sharp tug as it accidentally caught in her hair and she turned away, desperate not to be seen.

"No, thank you," she called back, pressing her heels into Shakespeare's flank. "Good day!"

She spurred her horse and turned him back to the fields, grateful to have her back to the innkeeper and hopeful that he would not recognise Shakespeare or her cloak. Her turbulent thoughts flowed through her as she rode, trying desperately to tell herself that she had only done what she had done for Henry and that her love had nothing to do with it. They swirled around her mind as she arrived, damp and breathless, back at Sinclair Manor. Betty was in the doorway, wringing her hands as she rushed out into what had become a downpour.

"My lady! You were much longer than I thought you would be, your parents are expected back from church at any moment." Betty took her damp cloak from her shoulders as she spoke.

"Did you tell them what I asked?" Matilda asked, breathlessly dismounting.

"Yes, I told them that you were unwell." Betty turned to the groom, snapping her fingers.

“Take my lady’s horse away! The Duke and Duchess must not know she has ridden this morning.” Betty followed Matilda into the house, looking her up and down. “You’re soaked through, my lady, we must get you dried off before they return.”

“I know! I know!”

Matilda and Betty ran quickly up the stairs to the bedchamber, Betty hoisting Matilda’s drenched coat onto a passing maid and telling her to dry it in the kitchen. Once inside the privacy of Matilda’s bedchamber, Matilda quickly stripped off her damp dress and riding boots as Betty tidied up and pulled out a suitable day dress that Matilda sometimes wore when she was unwell.

“Did you get there in time?” Betty asked, pulling the dry gown over Matilda’s head. Betty was the only one Matilda had confided to about where she was going that morning. Betty had disliked the plan, but Matilda had needed her confidence in order for her plan to work.

“I did,” Matilda said shortly, not wanting to discuss it.

“Hmm,” Betty hummed, bringing a towel up and roughly drying Matilda’s dark curls. “I hope it does not come to ill.”

Her words cut so deeply to the heart of what Matilda had been thinking and feeling on her ride that for a moment she was speechless. She let Betty towel her head, the rough warmth of it comforting her slightly.

“I hope so too,” Matilda said quietly.

Betty stopped towelling and looked into Matilda’s eye curiously.

“Where is your necklace, my lady? The one your father gave you?”

Matilda clamped her hand over her neck, feeling the absence of her favourite piece of jewellery. A single, teardrop pearl with a silver clasp. A silver clasp with her initial engraved upon it.

“I don’t know.” Matilda scrambled in her damp gown, finding nothing. “I must have lost it on the...”

She thought of Henry in the church. She thought of the relief on his face she had thought she had seen for a moment before it turned to confusion. She had seen relief, hadn't she? She tried to convince herself she had, that she hadn't ridden over the country in the rain to do something horribly foolish and lost an important heirloom all on a whim. She had done it for Henry. It had all been for Henry.

"I must have lost it," Matilda finished lamely, wondering if she meant more than her necklace.

Betty looked at her closely. She didn't ask anything, just gently touched her calloused palm against her mistress' smooth cheek.

"All shall be well," Betty whispered, just as she had always done whenever Matilda was upset, lonely, hurt, or sick. It was as familiar to her as a mother's comfort. Matilda smiled, tremulously. For a moment, she really thought it might be.



"What on earth is going on?" Lady Linfield exclaimed as her three children burst into the drawing room, soggy from the sudden downpour, teary and sniffing and without their father.

"It is raining," Henry said sharply, handing his coat to the footman and helping Althea out of her wet cloak.

"I can very well see it is raining, Henry, what is wrong with Althea?" his mother demanded.

Henry didn't answer. Beside him, Althea was sobbing gently, her shoulders heaving, and Henry tentatively rubbed the cold flesh on her upper arms. He wondered if his sister would pull away from him, angry at him for what had happened, but she didn't. Instead, Althea leaned into his side, pressing her tear-stained face against his damp shirt sleeve.

"Oh Henry," she moaned. "What are we going to do?"

"We're going to take care of it," Henry said, fiercely gripping her to his side and then, seeing Medea's equally distraught expression, pulled her into his embrace too. "I'm going to find out who that woman was and make her recount her slander."

“What slander?” their mother jumped up, fanning herself intensely despite the cool turn in the weather. She was a nervous woman, made more nervous by her husband’s gambling. Henry had not been looking forward to telling her their news. Luckily, Medea jumped in.

“A lady came to the church and told everyone that Henry couldn’t marry Miss Danforth because he was already married!” Medea blurted out. “Then she ran away before anyone could catch her and Mr Danforth called off the engagement and said he would ruin us.”

“Oh good Lord.” Henry watched as his mother clutched at her lady’s maid, wilting back into the chaise lounge like a fainting damsel. “Fetch my smelling salts!”

“Why did he say that though?” Medea looked up at Henry, her little face pale. “Why does he have the power to ruin us, suddenly? This wedding wasn’t that important was it?”

“Here, my lady,” the maid murmured, waving a small vial under their mother’s nose and she snorted, coughing loudly.

“Oh, where is Lord Linfield? Oh, we are ruined!” their mother whined.

“But why?” Medea persisted. “Henry can just marry someone else can’t he? Why does it matter?”

Henry opened his mouth and then closed it again. Despite everything that had happened that morning and despite his resentment towards his father, he didn’t want to belittle his sister’s opinions of the man. In his silence, Althea pulled away, looking up at him.

“It’s because it had to be Miss Danforth, did it not, Henry?” Althea asked quietly, gazing into her brother’s eyes with dawning understanding. Their father had been a fool to imagine Althea would not eventually put two and two together. She was an intelligent young woman.

“This was an arrangement between our father and hers? A necessary arrangement?”

Henry didn’t know how to answer. He wanted to protect his sisters so badly, but he couldn’t lie to them, not now. He nodded tersely.

“Oh Henry.” Althea drew in a rattling breath and lowered herself into a chair, pressing her hand to her brow. “You shouldn’t have agreed to be part of —”

“Of course, I should have.” Henry cut her off, running his hand through his wet curls and letting Medea wrap her arms around his waist tightly. “I would do more to secure both of your futures, you know that. Just because our father has taken liberties with our security doesn’t mean I would.”

“None of that matters now!” Their mother shripped, making all of her children wince. She always despised to hear the ways Lord Linfield had failed to do his duty. “For who will marry my daughters now? Now that their brother has been so scandalised? Who will associate themselves with us now?”

“Yes, thank you, Mother!” Henry snapped as Althea drew in another shaking breath, all of her fears for the future laid out brutally by her mother. “That’s quite enough.”

“I knew you didn’t love her,” Medea whispered, looking up at him with tearful brown eyes. “You were only marrying her because you had to. She wasn’t pretty enough for you, Henry.”

“Pretty has nothing to do with it!” Lady Linfield stood up, glaring down at her sweet, naive daughter in a way that made Henry’s hackles go up. He squeezed Medea to him. “Henry had a duty to protect us, and he has clearly failed.”

Henry nearly rolled his eyes at the typicality of this statement. He was nearly certain that the only thread holding his parents’ marriage together was his mother’s ability to gloss over his father’s shortcomings.

“It was not his fault, Mama,” Medea tried, “the lady interrupted —”

Before Medea could finish mounting her defense of him, Henry heard the tell-tale sound of carriage wheels crunching in the gravel outside. Then a slammed door, hurried footsteps and a guttural, furious shout:

“Where is he? Where is my useless son?”

“In here, my lord!” their mother responded to her husband’s yell,

waving her fan energetically. Henry steeled himself and inadvertently moved his youngest sister behind him as his father strode into the room, a face like thunder.

“We are here, Father,” Henry said.

Just looking at his father’s tempestuous face, Henry could tell that any kind feeling, any goodwill that his father had proclaimed earlier in the week had vanished the moment the stranger in the church had made their proclamation. Henry wanted to be unsurprised by it, he wanted it not to hurt him that his father who had confessed his failings and his wrongdoings was now turning the blame entirely onto him, but it still cut him deeply. He wondered momentarily if there was indeed a threshold at which a son could stop being hurt by a father, and if he would ever reach it.

“Who is it, hmm?” His father threw down his walking cane with a loud clatter, tossing his top hat onto the settee. Henry felt Medea wince at the noise behind him. She was not used to seeing her father enraged. Unlike Henry, who had the dubious privilege of being a man and able to stand by his father’s side as he lost hundreds of pounds at dog tracks, horse races and gambling halls across London. He was very familiar with this whirlwind of anger and misplaced blame.

“Which common harlot have you kept hidden away in the wings? Who have you promised yourself to and ruined your family for?”

“Excuse me?” Henry tried not to rise to his father’s ire. He knew that would only make it worse. “I already told you, whoever that woman is, she is a liar.”

“Do not lie to me!” his father roared. Henry could feel Medea jumping behind him and his heart went out to his sisters. They shouldn’t have to see their father and brother fight like this.

“I am not the one who lies in this family,” Henry said coldly. “And it is not my behaviour that has brought us to ruin.”

“You damnable rogue!”

“Papa!” Althea exclaimed, jumping up at her father’s insult but he was not to be deterred. In a quick movement, his father had grabbed Henry by the collar of his waistcoat, just as he had done when he was

in trouble as a boy, and pushed him against a cabinet.

“Edgar!” his mother exclaimed.

“Henry!” he felt Medea’s small hands scrabbling to pull him back, but Henry pushed them away from the fray, concentrating instead on his father’s hot breath on his neck.

“Tell me the name of the woman you have scorned so badly she felt the need to announce herself today!” his father shouted into his face. “Tell me at once!”

“Papa, no!” Over his father’s shoulder, Henry saw Althea making a movement as if to pull her father off her brother.

“Althea, take Medea upstairs!” Henry shouted, using his free hand to gesture his sister back. Henry’s words stopped Althea in her tracks. Henry held her gaze, a warning in his eyes.

Don’t get involved. I don’t know what he is capable of. Protect yourself.

She obeyed, her eyes wide with concern, pulling a crying Medea out of the room as their mother sank back down into her seat. The retreating footsteps of the girls’ echoed in the entrance hall, the only sound in the tense parlour. Henry and his father stared at one another.

“Let him go, Edgar,” his mother said wearily.

“Not until he tells me her name,” his father growled.

“She doesn’t exist,” Henry said calmly. “I have never married. I have never promised myself to another. I have no idea why this has happened.”

“Bullshit!” his father yelled, spittle landing on Henry’s face. Behind them, his mother winced. “You didn’t want this match in the first place, you must have done something to coordinate this, to make me look like a fool in front of Danforth.”

“You really believe I would do such a thing to my sisters?” Henry pushed his father away, watching the older man stumble slightly. Henry was by far the stronger individual. The only reason he hadn’t

thrown his father off when he had first manhandled him as he didn't want to behave that way in front of Althea and Medea, but now he had no reason not to. His father needed reminding who he was. He could see from the look in his eyes that he was realizing Henry's youth, athleticism and boxer's hands all at once.

"I believe you would do anything to revenge yourself upon me for my failings, Henry," his father said bleakly, staring at his son with red rimmed eyes. "Even this."

"Unbelievable." Henry shook his head. "I may be a bachelor and enjoy my comforts —" he saw his mother's eyebrows tweak at his words, "— but I have never given you any evidence that I would abandon my family, or in any way jeopardize them. Which is more than can be said for you."

"And you don't believe it possible that one of these so-called comforts has come back to roost?" His father said icily, his face taut with rage. "For God's sake, son! What else could have happened?"

"The only people I owe explanations to in this circumstance are my sisters," Henry said bluntly, clenching his fists so tightly his nails dug into his palms. "You can go to hell, for all I care."

"Henry!" his mother gasped.

He saw the look of painful surprise in his father's eyes, but he didn't care anymore.

Perhaps this is the threshold. Perhaps this is the moment he stops being able to hurt me. Henry marched to the door, flinging it open.

"Where are you going? Running away from the chaos you've caused?" his father demanded nastily behind him.

"I am going to see Owen and sort out this mess." Henry glared at his father as he snapped his fingers for his coat. "Lord knows I won't be getting any help from you."

Chapter Nine

2 3rd July 1822

Henry Linfield is the most infuriating young man that I have ever known. Today we went on a ride all together and he kept telling Althea, Julia, and I that we are too young to jump the hedges, even though I am a better rider than even him! When I said that to him, and that I had been riding since I was little, he said it was because he was a man, and I was just a child! Why can't I get him to see me for what I am? I am fourteen years old now, I will be coming out in two years, I'm practically a woman. Even if I'm not as old as he is, I am hardly the baby he pretends me to be. It's like he can't see the real me, just the child I used to be.

"Matilda! Tea!"

Matilda snapped her diary from four years ago closed and slipped it back into the trunk under her bed in which she kept all her old diaries. She locked it easily and nudged the trunk out of sight with her foot. Since the event at the church two days ago, Matilda had been preoccupied with Henry. She had been re-reading her old diaries, unable to stop herself obsessing over how she had recorded their interactions and her well documented frustration that Henry had never seen her as an equal. Had she been foolish to assume that Henry still wanted the things he had wanted three years ago? Had she made a terrible mistake in interfering with his wedding?

"Coming," Matilda called back from her bedroom, trotting down the corridor to her parents' private parlour. Walking through the door, she saw that Frances was pouring tea. Frances and Matilda didn't take tea every day, but Matilda knew that her mother had noticed her withdrawing in the last two days. Consequently, she had requested this tea together.

"Hello Mama," Matilda said, leaning against the door frame of the

room, watching her mother affectionately. Frances looked beautiful in a dark blue gown that showed off her strawberry blonde curls. She looked up at Matilda and smiled, the skin around her eyes crinkling with love.

“Dearest, come and sit.” She gestured gently, and Matilda entered the room, enjoying the familiar scent of her mother’s parlour: Vanilla, jasmine, and fresh tea leaves. “I have a new blend for us to try today, and Mrs Bury has made some jam tarts.”

“Goodness, what did I do to deserve this?” Matilda joked, flopping into the chair opposite Frances. Jam tarts had been Matilda’s favourite treat as a child, and now they were Barty’s.

“I think she worries about you.” Frances smiled, handing over a willow patterned teacup. “She made these especially for you. Strawberry, your favourite. She made some blackcurrant ones for your brother.”

“Oh.” Matilda took her cup and looked into the light brown liquid, enjoying the delicate fragrance. “I must have done something terrible to get a selection of my own jam tarts.”

“Have you done something terrible?”

Her mother asked the words so lightly that Matilda nearly flinched. She thought of her words at the church. Perhaps she had.

“Of course not.” Matilda swallowed and took a sip of her tea, unable to meet her mother’s eye. “This is a lovely blend, Mama, what are they calling it?”

“I believe they have named it ‘white mist.’ Your father ordered it from China.” Frances shook her head indulgently. “He is so eccentric.”

“He knows you love tea.” Matilda smiled at her father’s sweet gestures of love. “He would do anything for you.”

“For you too, my darling.”

Matilda looked up her mother who gazed at her softly, the sun making her hair glint prettily against the calm, pale furnishings of the room.

“Father told you about our row last week.” Matilda sighed, setting her teacup back down.

“He did.”

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“I know that.” Frances reached across the small table and squeezed her hand gently. “I know you would never deliberately cause him pain.”

“Whatever I do at the moment seems to cause him pain.” Matilda sighed.

“That’s not true, my dearest.” Frances leaned forward as she spoke earnestly. “You know that you bring your father such joy. He just worries about you.”

“He worries about everything!” Matilda exclaimed, remembering her father’s words in the woods: *What if tragedy struck, and a terrible plague were to take your mother and I, and your brother? What would happen to you then, the newly made Duchess of Sinclair, alone in the world?*

“He is convinced that something terrible will happen to me,” Matilda moaned, feeling her anger reignite as she recalled his harshness. “Nothing will convince him otherwise!”

“Darling, you know why that is.” Frances spoke so patiently that it calmed some of Matilda’s residual rage. “Because terrible things happened. Again, and again.”

Frances’ other hand strayed unconsciously up to the double line of pearls at her neck. Underneath was the still lingering white line of a scar that remained after eight years. The scar of Aunt Adley’s attempt on Frances’ life. Matilda’s blood ran cold to remember it.

“I know that,” Matilda replied, all of the wind taken out of her sails. She squeezed her mother’s hand, the slightly pained expression in Frances’ eyes reminding her that her father’s concern wasn’t as irrational as she liked to imagine. Both of her parents carried the legacy of that time.

But I don't want to carry it, not forever. I want to be free of it.

"But good things happened too, Mama," Matilda said, cautiously trying to put the core of her frustration into words. "We became a family, we were happy, Barty came along...He can't spend my whole life trying to protect me from every dark shadow."

"That's what parents do." Frances smiled.

"Not your father," Matilda countered. "If your father had been overprotective of your reputation he would never have allowed you to come and stay with father when you were young. Then you and father would never have fallen in love!"

"Well, I'm not sure you should take our courtship as a model, darling." Frances laughed, her eyes bright.

"But I have to be able to make my own decisions, don't I?" Matilda pressed. She knew that if she could get her mother onside a little, if she could get Frances to understand how oppressive her father's expectations felt to her, she might have a chance at him calming down at Frances' suggestion. "Just like you did?"

"Yes, I suppose." Frances sighed eventually, leaning back in her chair, and looking at her daughter with a tilt of her head. "It is hard to scold you when you remind me of my own youth, Matilda."

"That couldn't be why I did it, could it?" Matilda teased, wiggling her eyebrows.

"You are far too cunning for your own good! Your father's daughter through and through." Frances laughed, resting her head back against the chair cushion. "But you can't expect him to cease worrying. Terrible things do happen and often without rhyme or reason."

Matilda knew Frances spoke from experience. She had lost her own mother young to a terrible age, just as Matilda had done.

"Just look at the Linfields." Frances sighed, her eyes drifting to the scandal sheet lying on the coffee table. Matilda's heart lurched. She'd been checking the scandal sheets for mentions of Henry for the last two days. Nothing had been published so far. She longed to read it.

“That poor family did nothing to deserve what has happened to them.”

“Henry Linfield had another wife, that was hardly an accident.” Matilda swallowed hard. “I would never say he deserved it but perhaps it is best his marriage to Miss Danforth didn’t take place.”

“I wasn’t referring to that, I was referring to the Linfield daughters.”

Matilda’s stomach plummeted. She recalled Althea’s face in the church. The crushing disappointment.

“How should it impact Althea and Medea?” Matilda asked tightly.

“Take a look,” Frances said, passing her the scandal sheet. Matilda couldn’t stop herself from grabbing it and flipping it over, finally finding the heading that read:

SCANDAL IN LINFIELD MATCH.

The scandal of Lord Linfield’s secret wedding and attempted bigamy at St George’s church has appeared to be just the tip of the iceberg threatening to sink the house of Linfield this week. It has become known that Baron Foley’s intended match for his son with Miss Daphne Danforth was an arrangement made in part for the settlement of a debt between the Baron and Mr Danforth. In the absence of the successful reading of the banns between Lord Linfield and Miss Danforth, it appears that Baron Foley’s estate may be entailed to Mr Danforth and the Linfield family launched into the murky waters of disgrace. With a hidden wife and two unwed sisters to care for, it seems Lord Linfield shall have a difficult future ahead of him if he intends to save the young Linfield ladies from ruin.

“Oh.” Matilda set the paper back down with shaking hands. “That’s terrible.”

“Yes.” Frances sighed, sipping her tea. “Unfortunately, young men like Henry Linfield rarely think about their sisters when they get themselves embroiled in such escapades.”

“I don’t understand what they are saying here,” Matilda pointed to a specific sentence, “that the match was settlement as part of a debt?”

“It occurs sometimes between gentlemen who have gambling debts to settle.” Frances wrinkled her nose in distaste. “Sometimes when a man does not have the financial means to reconcile what is owed, he uses what he does have. In the case of Baron Foley, it was his son’s hand in marriage.”

“So, Henry was being forced into it?”

There was some relief in that thought, in knowing that even if she had inadvertently caused distress to the Linfield girls she had at least brought about Henry’s freedom.

“That I cannot tell you.” Frances shrugged. “He might have decided it was the best way to save his family.”

“That should be his father’s responsibility, not his,” Matilda said hotly. “He was the one who brought debt to his family, he should be the one to make sacrifices.”

“Perhaps, but that is rarely how it works.” Frances smiled at Matilda indulgently, as if she had said something incredibly naive. “Remember, when I met your father I was in a similar position. My own father had lost a lot of money in a bad business deal and I was under pressure to make a match.”

“Why should that be your fault?” Matilda exclaimed. “Why should you have to give up your freedom?”

“Well, as you so eloquently put it to Barty the other week, ‘women are property in this world and when they marry their status is transferred from their father or brother to their husband,’ was that not how you phrased it?” Frances grinned as her daughter opened and closed her mouth, irritated to have been caught out by her own words. “When my father’s status and prospects declined so did mine. The same thing happened to Lord Linfield and his sisters.”

“But Henry is a man, he would have survived a scandal.” Matilda frowned. “Why would he need to marry Miss Danforth? She hardly gives him status.”

“No, she does not.” Frances pursed her lips, considering. “Which leads me to believe that Lord Linfield’s choices were dictated by those around him who could not survive a scandal. His sisters.”

Matilda felt incredibly stupid. She had assumed that since Henry had always railed against marriage he could only be entering into a union against his will if someone was forcing his hand. She had completely forgotten to take into account Henry's never-ending care for his sisters.

"But Althea is beautiful and kind and very intelligent, she will surely be accepted into society anyway?" Matilda asked desperately, "And Medea is the same, they are both the light of any room. Why should their father's disgrace or indeed Henry's —" Matilda swallowed down the fact that Henry's disgrace was entirely of her own making, "— affect those things about them? They are not less beautiful or intelligent for it."

"Oh Tilly, my sweetest girl, you have such a good, innocent heart." Frances leaned forwards and pressed her warm palm against Matilda's face, looking at her with such tenderness. "I wish it was so. But you know it is not."

"I don't accept it," Matilda stated.

"Really?" Frances raised her eyebrows challengingly. "You were so cynical about your own potential suitors, that they were only interested in you because of your title —"

"But I am not half as pretty as Althea!" Matilda exclaimed, "surely a sensible gentleman would see past these tragic circumstances and want her for a bride?"

"I wish it were so," Frances said, petting Matilda's hair in a comforting way. "But I fear that is not how the world works. Baron Foley has sinned, so his children must suffer. Henry Linfield made a bad choice and now his sisters will bear the burden of it."

Matilda's throat tightened up at the thought of it. It was hideous. Althea and Medea were innocent, more innocent than Matilda could pretend to be. Now, because of Matilda's own actions, they were both going to be thrown into the void of society, tarnished forever, cursed to carry the titles of spinsters for all of their lives. All Althea had wanted was to marry and bear children, Matilda knew that about her childhood friend. How had Matilda's love for Henry blinded her so completely to the consequences of her actions? She couldn't bear it.

“It isn’t fair,” Matilda choked, blinking back tears. “How can we make it better?”

How can I make it better? How can I correct my mistake and take away this guilt that I feel?

“We cannot,” Frances said sadly, “but we can be kind, and friendly, and offer our condolences and our unwavering support in these difficult times.”

“Father will allow it?” Frances sniffled, rubbing her nose with the back of her hand. “He won’t tell me I should shun them now they have fallen into disgrace?”

“Your father has known Baron Foley for a long time, and he knows that you treasure your friendship with his family.” Frances smiled tenderly. “We will not shun them, no. If we see them tomorrow, we shall be polite and generous.”

“Tomorrow?” Matilda frowned.

“Tomorrow is the Reading ball,” Frances reminded her. “The Countess of Reading is celebrating her second child.”

“Oh yes, I remember.”

In all the turmoil, it had entirely slipped Matilda’s mind that the whole family was due at a lavish ball the following evening. Matilda’s stomach cramped at the idea of seeing the Linfield family.

“Do you think they are likely to attend after such a week?” Matilda half hoped that they wouldn’t be there. She didn’t know how she could possibly face Althea now.

“If I were their mother, I would insist upon it.” Frances sipped her tea with a knowing look in her eye. “Society is like a pack of wolves, always circling, looking for the weakest member to pick off and devour.”

“Goodness, Mama, you make it sound quite horrible,” Matilda said, picking up her own teacup and taking a fortifying sip. The gentle flavour calmed her panicking heart.

“When society turns upon you, it is quite horrible, yes,” Frances said, flatly. Matilda knew she was remembering the way she and Matilda’s father had been the talk of the town, especially after Aunt Adley’s crimes. It must have been a terrible time. That was what Althea and Medea were going through now, what Henry was going through, all because of what Matilda had done.

“That is why one must never show weakness in society,” Frances continued, her amber eyes glinting ominously. Matilda knew from the expression on Frances’ face that this was something she was eager for Matilda to understand. “You must always show that you are made of steel, ready to face down any disaster or adversity. That is what we must do for our friends.”

Matilda nodded. She could do that. She could be strong for Henry and Althea, and hide away deep down the uncomfortable truth that she had been the one to cause all of their problems.

“You are a sweetheart and a good friend.” Frances patted her hand softly. “Henry and Althea Linfield are lucky to have you on their side.”

“I hope we can make the situation bearable for them,” Matilda said in a small voice, finishing her cup of tea. She stood up, unable to bear sitting with her mother and hearing her compliments any longer. “I shall go and check my shoe roses, Mama. I shall let you know if I need more.”

“Thank you, dearest.” Frances was turning her attention back to the scandal sheet, her eyes reviewing it. “Don’t forget, the dressmaker is coming later for final fittings of your new gown. You shall look ravishing.”

“Thank you.” Matilda closed the door of her mother’s parlour and leaned against it, breathing deeply as she tried to hold back her tears. Despite her guilt over what she had accidentally done to Althea, she couldn’t help but feel a tremor of excitement. Tomorrow night she would see Henry again.

Chapter Ten

“*T*his is a terrible idea,” Althea muttered under her breath as their carriage pulled up outside the Reading estate. “Why are we doing this?”

Henry looked sympathetically at his young sister. This was the year of her debut. She had been kept back a few years by their father, many of her friends had been out a year or two already. Consequently, Althea had been itching to be released upon society. It was meant to be a summer filled with excitement and joy for her but the look on her face was anything but joyful. She was staring out of the carriage window with trepidation in her eyes.

“Because we cannot show any fear to society,” Henry sighed heavily. “We need them to know that we are unafraid.”

“We could do that from the safety of home,” Althea sulked, folding her arms across her new gown.

“It would look like a retreat, Althea, as if we have done something wrong, and we haven’t,” Henry said sharply. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“I know that.” Althea looked up at him tenderly. “But why are Mama and Papa not here?”

Henry sighed, running his hand through his hair. It had been a matter of much contention at home. Their mother had taken to their bed, claiming a headache, and ensconced herself away with her lady’s maid and her smelling salts. Their father had locked himself away in the study, steadily losing himself in a bottle of brandy and his own self-pity.

“Because they are not as strong as you or me,” Henry said frankly, offering his hand to his sister. “And perhaps because they feel they have already lost and have nothing left to fight for, but we know different, don’t we?”

He waited a moment, to see if Althea was willing to do this with him. He couldn’t do all this alone and he wouldn’t force her to go into the ballroom, not if she really didn’t want to. Althea looked at him steadily, as if weighing everything up. Henry held his breath. Althea had never doubted aloud that the incident in the church was Henry’s fault, but he had wondered if, inside her head, she had questioned his integrity. This moment was a test of her belief in him, as well as his own self-belief. The ballroom would probably yield many unfriendly faces and whispers. They needed to be strong together or they would never weather it all.

“We do,” Althea sighed, putting her hand in his and squeezing gently. “We have my future to fight for, and yours, and Medea’s, even if mother and father are too self-absorbed to see that at the moment.”

“They are only overwhelmed.” Henry frowned. Despite his own cynicism regarding his parents, he didn’t want his sister to inherit it. “Do not judge them too harshly.”

“I will judge them by their actions,” Althea said tartly, “and hopefully the people inside will refrain from judging us by the actions of our parents. Shall we go in?”

“Of course,” Henry said, opening the carriage door and stepping out. He thought that perhaps his sister had given the most insightful commentary into their situation that he had heard so far. He held out his arm for Althea and the two of them walked up the stone steps of the estate, Althea’s beautiful gold dress glinting in the light of the flaming torches illuminating the entrance. At once, Henry could feel the eyes of the Ton upon them, could feel the whispers building. Althea clutched his arm tightly, taking a deep breath as their steps echoed on the corridor and towards the shining lights of the ballroom.

“Courage,” Henry whispered to his sister, watching the way her jaw tightened with resolve and she nodded curtly. They walked into the room.

Henry had thought people exaggerated when they said that a had

room stopped when a person had entered, but now he knew it was possible. When he and Althea stepped into the room, it felt like silence descended. He knew that it couldn't be true, that the musicians were still playing and there were people who were still talking, but the way that everyone near the entrance turned and stared in silence was highly disconcerting. He could feel Althea's steps faltering as they moved further into the room, gravitating naturally towards a window, people moving away from them like running water. Henry tried to smile at familiar faces but only found frowns and looks of distaste. He began to catch fleeting words of the whispers that were flying past them.

"He was already married they are saying...utterly hoodwinked the Danforth girl..."

"I heard that Mr Danforth will take their estate and turn the daughters out onto the street..."

"The debt is upwards of fifteen thousand pounds, I heard..."

By the time they reached the window, Henry felt like every muscle in his body had stiffened up and he could see Althea's chest rising and falling rapidly, as if she was struggling for breath.

"Are you alright?" he murmured, glaring around at the gossips, daring them to speak any slander to his face.

"Of course, I am not!" Althea hissed, fanning herself as she blinked back tears. "Everyone is looking, and I can hear what they're saying, calling me a spinster and you —"

"Don't listen to them," Henry urged, "just hold your head up, we can do this."

"No, I don't want to." Althea shook her head, golden curls jiggling. "Let's leave, Henry, let's just go."

"Althea!"

A lilting, feminine voice rang out through the ballroom, stopping some of the whispers around them. Althea and Henry turned in surprise to see a dark haired, beautiful woman striding confidently towards them giving not a glance to the astonished ladies and gentlemen watching

her.

“Matilda!” Althea exclaimed, and then, as if realizing who her friend was and their rapidly declining family fortunes, inclined her head in a delicate curtsy. “I mean, my lady Wynter, what a pleasure to see you.”

Matilda Wynter? Henry couldn’t stop himself doing a small double take as the charming woman came closer, doubting suddenly that this elegant woman could be his childhood friend.

“Oh, none of that!” Matilda said, seizing Althea’s hands in a public show of affection. “It is Matilda as always, or Tilly, or Tills, if you absolutely must, Lord Linfield.”

With those last words, she turned and nodded at Henry, winking lightly in a way that made him want to suddenly laugh out loud. She may no longer be a little girl with twigs in her hair and a sunburnt nose, but that twinkle in her eyes was exactly the same.

“Well, if it is to be so, *Tills*, then you can, of course, call me Henry.” Henry grinned, slipping so easily back into the familiar banter of their younger years. He bowed to her formally, knowing she would appreciate the irony of the gesture. “At your service.”

“As we are at yours, Linfield.”

Henry looked up to see the Duke and Duchess of Sinclair standing behind Matilda, looking both handsome and dignified. The Duchess was dressed regally in a dark blue gown with matching sapphires at her throat, and the Duke was smiling at both he and Althea with generosity in his face.

“It is good to see you again, dear boy,” the Duke said, offering his hand to shake. Henry felt Althea gasp beside him at such a formal, positive signal of the Duke’s friendship. Gratitude rushed through Henry like a river, and he felt almost dizzy with it. He seized the Duke’s hand, shaking it firmly.

“You too, your grace,” he said, swallowing back his relief. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the way that the people surrounding them were staring openly, their whispers ongoing but less pointed, by far. That Henry and his sister had managed to maintain the friendship of

the Duke of Sinclair despite the scandal surrounding them was worth remarking upon.

“We are so glad you were able to attend tonight,” the Duchess said softly, smiling at Henry. She offered him her hand and Henry, grateful that she too was allowing him the opportunity for this public show of friendship, bowed over it, and kissed it politely.

“Thank you, your grace, we are certainly glad of your presence here tonight,” Henry said honestly. “Others have not been so kind.”

“A man must be allowed to make mistakes, especially a young man like you.” The Duke shrugged. “Lord knows I made mistakes when I was your age.”

Henry nodded gratefully. He knew the Duke was referring to the reputation he had held prior to his marriage to the Duchess — he was a known rake. Even though Henry wanted to correct the Duke and explain that he had made no such mistake, that the woman at the church had lied, he was too thankful that the Duke and Duchess were favouring him to say it. Althea was not so inclined.

“It was not Henry’s fault, your grace,” Althea said, touching Henry’s arm supportively. “I am sure you have heard terrible rumours, but what was spoken at the church last weekend was utter falsehood. That woman, whoever she is, is a liar. Henry has committed no such crime.”

Henry blushed, feeling the eyes of the Duke and Duchess watching him carefully. Surprisingly, he noticed that Matilda was blushing too. He could only suppose she found talk of such things distasteful or embarrassing. He waited for the moment for the Duke to express his disbelief of Henry’s story, just like everyone else had done. It didn’t come.

“Has anything been done to find the woman?” The Duke asked.

“I should think so,” a familiar voice spoke at Henry’s shoulder. “I have some of my most reputable men working on it.”

Henry breathed a sigh of relief as he turned to see the friendly face of Owen grinning at him. He turned back to the Duke.

“Your grace, may I introduce my dear friend, Lord Barton?” The Duke nodded politely to Owen who inclined his head. “Barton, may I present the Duke of Sinclair, the Duchess of Sinclair and their daughter, Lady Matilda Wynter?”

“It is an honour to make your acquaintance, your graces.” Owen swept into a polite bow before the Duke and Duchess and then grinned flirtatiously at Matilda. “Lady Wynter, I hear charming things.”

“I am sure you do,” Matilda replied tartly, a twinkle in her eye. “You should be warned, Lord Barton. I hear things too.”

“Is that so?” Owen’s grin was widening, and he was starting to get that hungry look in his eyes when he saw a woman who fascinated him. Henry felt his stomach flip-flop unexpectedly. When had Matilda become so proficient in flirting?

“Althea, what a charming dress this is,” the Duchess said, reaching out between the small group to touch Althea’s sleeve. Matilda and Owen’s eye contact was broken and Henry was sure that had been the Duchess’ intent. No doubt the Duke had a suitor in mind with less hedonistic habits than Owen Barton.

“You must tell me who your dressmaker is,” the Duchess continued, “let us talk over here, this is hardly a discussion for gentlemen. Come, Matilda.”

Henry had to admire the Duchess’ charm and proficiency in separating Matilda from potentially unsuitable matches. He almost laughed aloud, however, when he saw a familiar disgruntled look on Matilda’s face. She rolled her blue eyes at him as her mother pulled her a few steps closer to the window, already discussing fabrics with Althea. Henry smirked back, but couldn’t help a small flicker of relief that Owen would not be able to continue his advancement.

“So, tell me what has been done to find the woman who has defamed you,” the Duke asked, looking at Owen. “It is good of you to help your friend, Lord Barton.”

“I would do nothing less for such a man as Linfield,” Owen said, nudging Henry’s shoulder affectionately. “My men are investigating the route she might have taken away from the church.”

“That church borders our estate,” the Duke said thoughtfully. “If you require any assistance from my grounds keeper, you only need ask.”

“You are too kind, your grace,” Henry said, but the Duke wafted his words away with a wave of his gloved hand.

“I only wish I could do more,” the Duke said, then, with a moment of pause added: “And how is your father?”

Henry swallowed. He knew that his father and the Duke of Sinclair had been acquainted for a long time, no doubt since their wild days before the Duke had remarried. Unfortunately, unlike the Duke, his father never seemed to have outgrown his bad habits.

“He is as well as can be expected,” Henry said, trying to hide his discomfort. “Excuse me gentlemen, I must seek out some refreshment for my sister.”

“Of course.” Owen clapped him on the shoulder, his sharp eyes indicating that he knew the source of Henry’s lack of ease. “Your grace, I believe you are acquainted with my father, the Duke of Lennox?”

“I am indeed, how is he?”

Grateful for Owen’s intervention, Henry slipped away from the men and walked to the refreshment table, fetching a glass of lemonade for Althea and a small glass of brandy for himself. Now when he crossed the room, the crowds didn’t melt away around him like he was carrying plague. Now the whispers that followed his footsteps sounded curious and interested rather than snide and unpleasant. Such was the effect of the Duke of Sinclair’s favour.

Holding the drinks, Henry walked slowly back to the group by the window. He found he was reluctant to rejoin the gentlemen, worried about having to resume a conversation about his father, and instead found a quiet spot nearby the ladies. Althea and Matilda were deep in conversation and he didn’t want to disturb them, happy to wait for an opening in their conversation and to sip his brandy. It also gave him a moment to subtly watch Matilda and try to puzzle out the mystery of the change in her. She was unchanged in essence, that much Henry was sure of. The dark, curling ribbons of hair were the same, the sharp cheekbones and clear blue eyes were familiar, but she would still been

unrecognisable to him if Althea had not said her name. She was dressed in a beautiful silver gown, with a shining embroidery of silver leaves cascading from the bust downwards, giving her the look of some kind of ethereal forest nymph. Everything about her appearance proclaimed softness and delicacy, two qualities he would have never associated with the Matilda Wynter he knew, the tree climbing menace of their younger days. It was quite astonishing. Then, just as he was wondering if Matilda's collarbones had always looked so particularly beautiful, the Duchess moved away from the two girls and he heard the pitch of their conversation shift.

"How are you really?" Matilda asked, leaning her dark head towards Althea's golden one.

"Terrible," Althea answered honestly, and Henry couldn't help but wince at his sister's despondent tone. "I am scared, Tilly. I don't want to be a spinster."

"You will not be, you are too beautiful, too clever, to be left on the shelf." Matilda answered instantly, and Henry's heart was warmed by the sincerity of her words. Althea was lucky to have a friend like her.

"Besides," Matilda continued, sounding glum, "it is perhaps better than the fate that awaits me. Father wants to introduce me to a viscount tonight — he is twelve years my senior and by all accounts, thoroughly dull. I think I would prefer spinsterhood to that."

Henry snorted into his brandy glass. Now that sounded like the Matilda Wynter he knew.

"Oh, Tilly, you can't be serious." Althea laughed, and Henry was glad to see her eyes light up with joy. Spending time with Matilda was exactly what she needed.

"I absolutely am!" Matilda said, tossing her dark curls. "What interest would I have in marriage? I have a perfectly lovely life now, living in my home with my family."

"A lady cannot live at home forever," Althea chided her friend softly. "Besides, do you not wish to fall in love?"

"Marriage has as much to do with love as cheese has to do with the moon," Matilda said and Henry couldn't help but bite his lip and look

away, worried he would burst out laughing. "Do you honestly think that my father is interested in finding me a love match?"

"I am not sure ladies with great titles, especially ladies who could become the Duchess of Sinclair one day, can expect to marry for love." Althea laughed. That was right, Matilda's father had received a parliamentary dispensation to make Matilda his heir in extraordinary circumstances. Given her wealth, status and beauty, Henry was not surprised that she had suitors lined up around the door. He shifted uncomfortably at the thought.

"If I cannot marry for love, then the only cause that might compel me is to marry for a little more freedom." Matilda sighed. "My father will not even let me go riding alone anymore! If I could find a husband who might allow me that freedom, who could be so open minded, then perhaps I should consider it."

"Well, any man should be lucky to have you." Althea sighed. "If we had your fortune, Tilly, our problems would be solved."

"Well, my dear, if I could marry you and solve your problems, I would!" Matilda laughed. "If only you were a man, Althea, then I could be your knight in shining armour. Then we could both be free and happy together."

"That's a thought," Althea pondered, her gaze slipping over to Henry.

"What is?" Matilda asked.

Henry saw the idea form in Althea's mind before she spoke it, watched her brown eyes glint with sudden purpose and insight. Even before he had fully caught up with it, before he was able to name it to himself, a small voice inside him said: Yes.

"Well, you cannot marry me but perhaps you can still be my knight in shining armour." Althea looked over at him, reaching out to grab his arm and tug him closer. "Why don't you marry Henry, Tilly?"

"Marry...Henry?" Matilda looked up at him in astonishment. Henry felt a warmth around his heart when he looked into her familiar bright blue eyes.

"Well, you are a lady in need of a partner who understands the

meaning of freedom, Henry is in need of an alliance that can advance him in society, you are friends, you both need to get married, why not?" Althea grinned. "What say you, Henry?"

"Well, if Lady Wynter is amenable," Henry spoke slowly, feeling as if the doors of society were opening up to his family inch by inch as he did. "Then I think it is a capital idea."

Chapter Eleven

“Capital?” Matilda repeated, staring between the two Linfield siblings, sure that at any moment they would declare this was all a joke. “You...you think that it is a capital idea?”

“Of course, it is capital!” Althea exclaimed, her eyes alight with mischief and excitement. “It’s a perfect scheme.”

“Anything you call a scheme, Althea, cannot be perfect,” Matilda commented, noticing how Henry’s eyes creased in amusement at her words. She had forgotten the innocent joy there was to be had in making Henry Linfield laugh.

“Yes, and one could hardly call a marriage a scheme, could they?” Henry joked.

“Well, what else might you call your match with Miss Danforth?” Althea countered.

“A disaster,” Henry said glibly, toasting the both of them with his brandy glass and Matilda snorted into her own drink.

“Tilly, do you not wish for a husband who is your friend? Who understands you completely and will give you your freedom?” Althea demanded.

“Yes,” Matilda said grudgingly, “but I was not suggesting you strong arm your brother into the position!”

“Oh, as if that is what happened.” Althea rolled her eyes. “Henry, tell her you want to marry her.”

“Don’t make him do that!” Matilda’s heart was in her throat. The only

thing worse than never having Henry was this forced connection. The idea that Henry would be pushed into a match with her was nearly as upsetting as him being forced to marry someone else! She swallowed hard as she looked into Henry's green eyes. "You don't need to say that."

"But this all makes so much sense," Althea protested. "Henry wouldn't impose rules upon you, like other husband's do, and you're the daughter of a duke, you have a substantial dowry, more than enough, you could..."

Althea's voice trailed away, a blush rising on her fair cheeks. Matilda's heart clenched for her. Althea wanted to say that Matilda's dowry would pay off their family's debt. Matilda felt the stinging burn of guilt, along with secondhand distress for Althea's desperation. How hideous it must be to feel like she had to ask her friend to save her. Even though the two of them had joked about it not moments ago, the extremity of having to put voice to this request, to say the words and truly mean them in front of one another, was extremely jarring. Althea was blushing with embarrassment, fiddling with the stem of her glass. Her eyes looked glassy with tears.

"Althea..." Matilda swallowed hard, unsure how to continue. At that moment, Henry put his hand on his sister's arm.

"Sister, I believe that this conversation is better had between Matilda and myself privately," Henry said, smiling down at Althea. Matilda was glad to see that Althea was comforted by this, smiling back up at her brother in relief, but was also astounded at Henry's words. Did he really mean to have this conversation with her, truly and sincerely? What on earth would he say?

"Shall we, Lady Wynter?" Henry offered her his hand to dance, bowing formally, a slight quirk in his smile that told her he was only partly playing a game. Matilda was immediately thrown back to the night of her coming out ball, when she had scanned the dance floor at Sinclair Manor, hoping desperately to pick out his face in the crowd. How she had longed then for this precise moment! When Henry Linfield asked her to dance. Despite her trepidation over what might be said between them, that he might somehow uncover the truth of her actions at the church, she did not think there was anything in the world that might compel her to turn him down.

“We shall, Lord Linfield.” Matilda smiled tightly at Althea and allowed Henry to lead her to the dance floor. His hand was warm. She could not remember the last time she had held his hand. Surely it must have been some time in that last summer, climbing trees or traversing rivers, hands held to overcome obstacles in moments of physical exertion. How much she had taken those casual touches for granted.

“Everyone knows there is never such an opportunity to exchange quiet words as a partnered dance,” Henry said softly to her as he let go of her hand, allowing her to get into position opposite him. She took a moment to take him in. He was taller than she remembered him to be. His blonde hair seemed darker now, though she supposed that could merely be because he no longer spent his every free moment rollicking outside in the sunshine. Age had tautened his features, they had lost a measure of that youthful softness and the lines of his jaw and cheekbones were sharper. It did not make him less alluring to her, in fact, she felt a thrum of desire deep in the pit of her stomach that she had not really felt before. His eyes, however, were just the same. Bold, earthy green irises that couldn’t help but remind her of the strong summer foliage that had surrounded them in the Sinclair woods. The music started and before Matilda knew it, she was stepping forward and grasping those warm hands once again.

“Well, I didn’t think there was anything more I could do this evening to provoke whispers, but this seems to have done it,” Henry said lowly. His eyes were darting around, taking in the other dancers and those watching. Matilda couldn’t perceive as much as he could at his height, but she could feel the swell of whispers around them.

“And what have you done?” she asked.

“Danced with Lady Wynter, of course.” He grinned roguishly. “It’s one thing for your father and mother to express friendship to me, but quite another for me to take you to the dance floor, although it is probably good to lay the groundwork, if we are really to be engaged.”

Matilda sucked in her breath, glad that this moment in the dance allowed her to turn her back on him, ducking her eyes away, hoping he wouldn’t see her expression. *Engaged*. Henry Linfield was seriously considering marrying her. So many of her youthful diary entries had imagined such a moment, but now that it was here she could only feel a suppressed panic underneath her skin. *Is this really happening?*

“Matilda? Are you alright?” Henry was looking down at her as they moved closer together, his blonde brows knitted together.

“Yes, of course.” Matilda nodded, averting her gaze from his inquisitive eyes.

“You are uncomfortable,” Henry stated in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Not with you,” Matilda said quickly, as their hands came together once more to circle around one another in an elegant twirl. “Just...the situation, the whispers.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Matilda could see her parents watching them. Her father looked pleased that she was taking part in the dance since she so often refused to stand up with the partners he selected, and rarely accepted offers when they were made. Matilda’s eyes caught Frances’. She had a curious expression, somewhere between thoughtful and cautious. Matilda didn’t know what it meant.

“You mean you don’t find malicious gossip conducive to a relaxed conversation?” Henry wiggled his eyebrows. “How odd.”

“Yes, it’s very odd, isn’t it?” Matilda laughed, grateful for his jokes and easy manner. “I’m used to people talking about me, but it feels very disconcerting when it’s someone else.”

“What do you mean?” Henry frowned.

“Oh, well, I’ve garnered a reputation as something of an eccentric.” Matilda rolled her eyes, hoping that her droll tone covered up the nervousness she was feeling. Had Henry really not heard what society said about her?

“Did they find out about your tree climbing habit?” Henry winked. “Because that certainly was eccentric.”

“No, they did not.” Matilda giggled, shaking her head. “It is more that I have been out in society for two years and have refused to make a match.”

“Refused?” Henry stepped closer as the dance moved, and Matilda caught a whiff of the warm scent of him — whisky and oak. “Have

you had many proposals?"

"None to me personally, and none that I consider genuine." Matilda sighed, unable to stop herself from glancing at her father as she weaved around the other couples before coming back to Henry. "My father has received several on my behalf. I have been disinclined to accept them."

"Well, it would have to be a very particular type of gentlemen to move Matilda Wynter from the path of adventure." Henry smiled.

Matilda's heart jumped.

It would only have been you, Henry, it could only ever have been you.

"Indeed." Matilda swallowed hard. "As Althea pointed out, that particular type of gentleman, one who can provide me the freedoms I seek, does not necessarily exist."

"Well, I can see the sense in suggesting me," Henry mused. "I am equally attached to my freedoms."

"So I hear," Matilda said wryly, without thinking.

"Oh, do you now?" Henry winked playfully and Matilda's heart skipped a beat.

She opened her mouth to respond but nothing came out. She had forgotten how this felt, to be on the receiving end of Henry Linfield's playful affection. The warmth in her chest, the tingling in her fingers, the hot flush on her cheeks and ears. It was utterly disarming, and Henry simply watched her, smiling at her with that slight, lopsided grin. Luckily, she was saved from stumbling for a response by the end of the dance. Relieved to have a distraction she clapped along with everyone else, not realizing until he was standing right beside her that Henry had taken hold of her elbow and was guiding her gently toward the patio.

"Let's have a few quiet words away from all of these prying eyes," Henry murmured.

"And you think that will halt the gossip?" Matilda hissed back in

disbelief. "If we are seen talking privately together?"

"Don't worry." Henry grinned at her as they stepped out onto the patio and into the slight chill of the August evening. "We're not completely alone."

Matilda realised that the patio was indeed well populated, and that the Countess of Reading had even set up a refreshments table outside, with warmed wine ready to be served. They both instinctively moved to get a cup, and Matilda was grateful of this small distraction that helped her avoid thinking about the way Henry's touch on her elbow, his quiet, insistent voice talking to her, had lit a fire in her stomach.

"Reading certainly has a beautiful estate," Henry commented, as they found an empty spot between other guests at the patio wall, looking down onto the grand lake.

"He does." Matilda sipped her warm, fragrant wine. It was soothing; the mix of citrus and cinnamon calming her racing heart and turning stomach.

"It is not as beautiful as the Sinclair estate though," Henry smiled at her, leaning his elbow on the patio wall. His blonde hair glinted in the light from the ballroom. "I have such good memories of our time in those woods."

"Me too." Matilda swallowed her wine, nodding.

I have good memories of you, Henry, so many. I have treasured them for so long.

They let silence flow between them, gently sipping their drinks and watching the moonlight dance on the water. She could tell that people around them were watching, wondering what they were discussing and why the eligible daughter of the Duke of Sinclair was giving the time of day to the disgraced heir of Baron Foley, but she didn't care. The silence was familiar and comforting. It reminded her of the times that she and Henry had read for hours together in the treehouse. She had never been as comfortable in anyone's silent presence as she had been in his.

"You've not changed, Tills."

Matilda jumped at her childhood nickname and looked up to see Henry smiling down at her, running his fingers around the lip of his wine glass, in a habit she recognized from childhood.

“Neither have you,” Matilda replied quickly, gesturing to his fingers. “You could never sit entirely still. I see you haven’t outgrown it.”

“Oh?” he looked down and laughed, lifting his glass to toast her. “You know me well, but that’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

“You always had this way of listening, waiting for a person to be comfortable speaking.” Henry smiled affectionately. Matilda’s stomach clenched when she realized he had noticed and enjoyed the same silence she had. “You still do. You always were a good friend.”

“Thank you.” Matilda tried not to blush, even though there was a sinking feeling inside her that denied her pleasure.

A good friend.

Henry wasn’t thinking of her romantically.

You’ve not changed, Tills.

He still thought of her the same way, as nothing more than a childhood friend. She needed to focus on that. However wonderful it felt to be in his presence, to imagine that this easy conversation was the beginning of a flirtatious courtship, she needed to remember the truth: Henry didn’t think of her like that. It would not help her to imagine he did. She had only gone to the church to help him escape a dark future, nothing more, and now she needed him to never find out what she had done. He would not think her a good friend if he knew.

“Do you want to talk about Althea’s ‘capital idea’?” Matilda asked, deliberately keeping her tone light as she sipped her wine.

“I suppose we should.” Henry nodded. “I know Althea was making you uncomfortable before —”

“It wasn’t that,” Matilda interrupted. “It was only that she seemed

embarrassed, and I didn't know what I could do to help."

"I know." Henry sighed. "She is struggling to adjust to this new reality, to the situation with my reputation, our father's fortunes..."

"I want to help." Matilda didn't want Henry to dwell on all the ways things were difficult for the Linfield family right now. She already felt terrible about it all, especially due to her part in it. "I really do, I just..."

I don't want to marry you if you do not love me.

"...I just have never wanted to get married," she lied. "To be curtailed in that way."

"I understand." Henry leaned forward eagerly, "I really do, but we don't have to think of this like a marriage."

"You want to marry me but not be married to me?" Matilda asked slowly, feeling her heartbeat pick up again. "I am not sure I follow."

"No, that's not what I mean." Henry ran a hand through his curls. "I only mean that I won't ask those things of you that other husbands ask."

"Those...things?" Matilda instantly thought of all that took place between a husband and a wife and felt a tremor of absolute desire mixed with complete mortification. She looked away quickly, staring instead at the doorway to the ballroom, mechanically watching the couples twirling inside.

If he tells me he will marry me but never consummate our union, I shall die of embarrassment.

"I shall not demand you be ladylike, for one," Henry said in a playful tone, completely unaware of the utter agony he had thrown her into. "You will be free to come and go as you please, free to have other friends, other...people."

Matilda realized what he was referring to. Henry didn't want his freedoms curtailed either. She remembered his reputation as a ladies' man. If he would be prepared to allow her freedom, she would have to

be equally prepared to allow his. She tried not to be crushed by the thought of marrying Henry only to have him carry on with other women. What was it that Lulu had said at the tea party?

Rumour has it he had a new bedwarmer every week.

Matilda tried not to be riled by the notion.

“Do you not think that might generate more gossip?” Matilda asked quietly, trying to keep the distaste out of her voice. “If we enter into a marriage but we maintain our...habits?”

“What, horseback riding alone?” Henry asked, brow furrowed in confusion.

“No, I mean more of...your personal habits, your personal...relationships.” Matilda held his gaze carefully, along with her breath. It was one thing to think these things about Henry, it was quite another entirely to speak them aloud. Henry stared down at her, his green eyes dark as emeralds in the low light.

“I am not suggesting this as a way to circumvent the sacrament.” He spoke so quietly that only she could hear. She thought she could see a flash of insult in his face, which was only confirmed when he added: “I am surprised you would think that of me.”

“You are surprised I think it, me as your childhood friend, but you are not surprised such thoughts might be known?” Matilda raised her eyebrows in a challenge to Henry’s hurt expression. “Let us speak honestly, Henry.”

He held her gaze for a moment and Matilda wondered if her hubris had taken her too far, but then he sucked in a breath and gave a sharp, short nod. Matilda let out her held breath and continued.

“It’s not so strange to think, is it?” Matilda queried gently. Henry watched her, listening carefully. “If the point of this union would be entirely mercenary, that we would only be doing it for gain rather than...personal preference, why would faithfulness be part of the arrangement?”

“Despite what everyone in society thinks, I am able to act with discretion,” Henry snapped, his fair skin blushing in the golden light

from the ballroom.

“Well, discretion, what a promise.” Matilda rolled her eyes. “Take me to the church this minute.”

“Matilda, come on.” Henry turned his face away from the crowd, making sure his expression couldn’t be read by the people around him. “Don’t make jokes.”

Matilda turned her body too, so the two of them faced directly out onto the garden, their arms pressed together and the moonlight on their faces. The idea that she was having this conversation with Henry Linfield was absurd, yet she could tell her words had bothered him. She took a deep breath.

“But it is a joke, isn’t it, Henry?” She said quietly. “The two of us, marrying to solve all of our problems. Don’t you think we would have more problems to deal with when people find out that you are wayward, and I am flighty? When people discover our marriage is nothing more than a sham?”

“They wouldn’t discover it,” Henry said.

“Henry, even your brand of discretion has witnesses,” Matilda said sarcastically, feeling a twist in her gut when she thought of the beautiful women he entertained.

“Tills, look at me.”

Maybe it was that familiar nickname that compelled her, but Matilda turned to look at him. His eyes bored down into her heart.

“I would never humiliate you in that way,” he murmured. “I promise. That’s more than most marriages start with.”

Matilda swallowed hard. Despite her grudging concern, she knew he was being honest. His sincerity was radiating off him in waves, making the delicate hair on the back of her arms stand up. She nodded, unable to speak, to show she understood.

“Besides, we’re good friends, aren’t we?” he nudged her arm with his elbow, smiling playfully, deliberately lightening the mood.

It was not quite saying that he would be faithful to her, but it was saying that he would respect her. He was right, they were good friends, and it was more than many marriages started with.

But this isn't any marriage, this is Henry. Can you really enter into this kind of heartless arrangement with a man you have loved for years?

"You're right, it's just..." Matilda let her words drift away. She couldn't explain to him why this decision was so much harder for her than it was for him. For him, it was an arrangement between friends. For her, it was more.

"I know it's strange," Henry whispered, "and it's so much to ask of a person, but...but I am in need of your help, Matilda, and I think I can be of help to you. That's all this is: two friends, helping one another out. What if we thought of it like that?"

I am in need of your help.

He wouldn't have been in need of it without her interference. Althea would be enjoying her debut in society, battling a hoard of interested suitors and being regarded as the diamond of the season. Henry would still be regarded as one of the most reputable gentlemen of the Ton. Baron Foley would keep his house, Medea would have a blossoming future and the Linfield family would be content and secure. She had broken all of these things. Matilda could taste the bitterness of it in her throat, the heavy toxicity of her guilt threatening to eat her up. As she looked into Henry's beautiful eyes, she knew that she owed it to both Henry and Althea to do this, even it was a terrifying mix of everything she had ever wanted and what she most feared.

"Alright." Matilda nodded, taking a sip of wine, trying to calm her thundering heart. "We should do it. I accept your proposal."

She was gratified when Henry's face lit up with excitement, but she buried that gratitude deep inside, along with a more intense flicker of desire and anticipation. Just because they were getting married, it didn't mean they were in love or that Henry was attracted to her. It didn't mean any of those things. No matter what she felt on the inside.

Chapter Twelve

“You’ll have to ask my father,” Matilda murmured as she held onto Henry’s arm. They were walking back into the ballroom, the heat of the bodies and dancers warming their chilled hands and cheeks. “You can tell him I’ve indicated my interest.”

“I shouldn’t tell him we’ve arranged it?” Henry asked quietly, looking down at the top of Matilda’s dark hair.

“No.” Matilda shook her head. “He might think it’s suspicious if we do this in an untraditional way. I don’t think he would be amenable to our arrangement between friends.”

“So, I shall have to make him believe I have fallen in love with you,” Henry said.

Matilda’s head jerked around to look up at him. Henry could see her blue eyes searching his face to see if he was making fun of her. He felt her relax when she couldn’t see a hint of it.

“Indeed,” she said, glancing over to her parents. “It should not be too hard to do. He is desperate for me to be married.”

“Well, we can plant the seeds now,” Henry said, confidently guiding Matilda to the dance floor again. “Two dances in one night, it is practically a proposal isn’t it?”

“Mama would say that it’s not serious unless a couple has done so at three consecutive balls.” Matilda smiled up at him, “but I suppose this will have to do.”

Henry looked at her as she stood across from him. It was a strange feeling, spending time in her company. Henry had been lucky in his

friends at school and Oxford, blessed to have Owen among his closest and dearest confidantes, but he had not realized until this moment that he had been missing Matilda for years. She had been Althea's friend officially, they were the same age and their mothers liked them to socialize together, but in those endless summers home from school together when they had played in the woods, Matilda had been constantly by his side. When they jumped fences on the horses, when they built the tree house, when they floated rafts down the river, she was there; messy and dirty and laughing alongside him. He had missed their easy companionship and had not noticed. He noticed it now.

"Well, well, welcome to the merry dance, my friend!"

They both looked around to see Owen leading Althea to the dance floor, Althea blushing gently at the honour of Lord Barton's attentions. Henry smiled at his friend gratefully. He doubted that Althea would have any other gentlemen filling her dance card this evening, unless her brother stood up with her. Althea instantly took her place beside Matilda, whispering to one another with their heads turned away. Owen turned to Henry.

"You seem quite cosy with Lady Wynter," he said quietly. "Anything I need to know about?"

Henry thought there was no harm in mentioning it to Owen. He would know that he had to be discreet.

"I am going to speak to her father tomorrow," Henry said equally quietly.

Owen's eyebrows shot up into his hairline in surprise, but he was restrained enough not to show his amazement in other ways.

"That is news indeed," Owen said evenly, wordlessly understanding the need for prudence. "And the lady is amenable to that?"

"Yes," Henry said. "We have discussed it."

"My word!" Owen couldn't stop himself from clapping him on the back. "But you do move fast when you get going, don't you Linfield? Two potential wives in as many weeks!"

“Yes, thank you, Barton,” Henry said loudly, hoping that the others around them hadn’t noticed those words. Matilda glanced at him quickly, smiling with a look of slight insecurity in her eyes. Henry tried to nod reassuringly at her, at the same time he turned to Owen.

“We are obviously not announcing anything until I have spoken to her parents,” Henry said in a low voice. “I am sure you understand.”

“I do.” Owen nodded, smiling at him brightly. “I suppose you shall now be even more eager to find the woman who disrupted your first engagement, now you are considering a second.”

“You are right.” Henry nodded. He had not thought about it until this moment, but the idea of the stranger interrupting another reading of the banns in church, the notion of Matilda being embarrassed in the same way Miss Danforth had been unbearable.

I would never humiliate you in that way.

He had meant those words when he had said them to Matilda mere moments before. He would have to work hard to ensure they were not murmurs of an empty promise.

“It would help things greatly if you gave me a list of your past conquests,” Owen said quietly. “I will need to make discreet inquiries on your behalf, ascertain if any of those ladies harbour a grudge.”

Henry threw a glance at Matilda and could see she was trying to hear their conversations over the bustle of dancers preparing for the movement. This was one conversation he really didn’t want her to decipher.

“That sounds suitable, Owen,” Henry said, turning his face away so that Matilda could not read his lips. “But perhaps a topic for another time.”

“Of course.” Owen nodded knowingly, but then whispered: “the Duke of Sinclair will not easily part with his eldest child. Are you sure he will accept your suit on her behalf?”

“I am hopeful,” Henry said, trying to sound more confident than he felt at that moment. Owen’s words had thrown doubt into his mind. The Duke loved Matilda more than many gentlemen loved their

daughters, perhaps the most Henry had ever seen a man love a child. Was he sure that he was the man to persuade him to part with her? Henry could feel his heartbeat racing as Owen stepped back into position and the music started. He stared blankly at Matilda, seeing her slight frown but not understanding its meaning, he was too consumed in his own thoughts. Could he really manage to do this? To save his family? Was it all a fool's errand that the Duke would see through immediately?

"Are you alright, Henry?" Matilda's voice interrupted his reverie as he automatically stepped towards her in the dance, surprisingly comforted by her warm hands in his as they turned quietly together.

"I am," he said, and then noticing her raised eyebrows added: "I am perhaps a little nervous about speaking to your father tomorrow."

Matilda smiled at him gently, her blue eyes shining.

"Father has always held you in great esteem," Matilda said. "Don't worry."

"Perhaps he did before, but now, with everything that happened with my previous engagement..." Henry sighed, shaking his head. "I am not as secure a prospect for a young lady as I would hope to be."

"He will not blame you," Matilda said, turning her head in the course of the dance and the pearls set in her earlobes catching the candlelight.

"Well, I shall do what I can to assure him that the disaster of my last engagement shall not be repeated," Henry said firmly. He noticed that Matilda seemed to stiffen a little as he said that. They parted in the dance and he thought he saw a troubled look blow across her face.

"What can you mean?" Matilda asked quietly.

"I am endeavouring to have the woman found," Henry explained quietly. "That will give your father assurance of my fidelity."

Matilda did not seem comforted by this, in fact her eyebrows knitted together even as she nodded at him.

“What will you do with the woman you find?” She asked finally. It was an odd question, but Henry supposed it was the kind of question a girl like Matilda might be interested in. She was always interested in working out how the world ran.

“We will expose her,” Henry said calmly, “and make her recant her claims against my honour.”

“Right,” Matilda said, sounding a little faint suddenly. “I see. And if you should never find her?”

“I hope that won’t be.” Henry frowned. “Are you alright, Matilda?”

“It’s the dancing.” Matilda’s face had paled, looking positively ghostly in the orange lights. Henry reached out automatically to steady her.

“You are overwhelmed, come on.” Despite the couples swirling around them and the eyes of the ballroom following, Henry tucked her hand into his elbow and guided her off the dance floor towards her parents.

“Matilda!” Frances exclaimed, noticing Matilda’s wan face, “are you quite alright?”

“Perhaps too much excitement for one evening,” Henry said, handing Matilda over to her mother’s grip, allowing himself to squeeze her hand reassuringly as he did. She gave him a tight smile. It felt strange to have this secret with Matilda, strange but lovely. He realized he trusted her. He didn’t trust many people, Owen, and Althea he counted as trustworthy but there were few others. Matilda was easy to trust, he found.

“Well, thank you for bringing her back to us, Lord Linfield,” Frances said, smiling up at him.

“You can always rely on me to do so.” Henry bowed to the Duke and Duchess, hoping they took his words to heart. Perhaps they would make his meeting with the Duke tomorrow go much more smoothly.



He and Matilda were dancing together in the mist. Henry could smell her hair, which was long and curling down her back and fragrant with jasmine

and bergamot. He twisted pieces of it between his fingers, feeling the silken tresses trail over his hands. Matilda sighed in his arms, her dark eyelashes fluttering closed as she leaned into his touch, one hand in her hair and the other at her waist. He could feel the warmth of her skin underneath pale, almost transparent muslin dress. He felt sure it was the thinnest fabric he had ever felt, that perhaps she shouldn't be wearing it, or he shouldn't be seeing it, but it felt so soft under his touch. It was of the lightest blue, a colour that made him think it must have been made of cornflowers or patches of sky, it seemed to shift in tone and brightness under his touch. Her collarbones were gloriously bare, begging to be kissed with all the reverence of a goddess.

"Henry." She let out a long, low breath, a sigh that sounded like wind and sea. "I want you so deeply."

"How deeply?" His voice didn't sound like his own. It was gruff and gravelly, intense with longing and desire. When he spoke and felt his lips move, all he wanted was to be kissing her, to be holding her close and feeling her lips against his. Before he could do so, before she had even answered, she was suddenly out of his arms, pulled away in a great swell of music, into the arms of another partner. The man looked like Owen but had no face at all, yet he held Matilda tightly in his arms and she swooned, her back arching gracefully as he tipped her in a waltz, her long hair floating as if it were made of air.

"Matilda!" His cry was lost in a baffling surge of bodies, dancers swirling around him without faces, a swarm of whispered words rising up from their endless circles. He couldn't make out the words they said but he knew they were about him. He could feel their cruel glances, their secret, judging looks needling him like a thousand pins. A bright, luminous light was following him, illuminating him for everyone's gaze to find him, making him hot and sweaty as if he was standing next to the sun itself. He needed to find Matilda, if he found Matilda, if he held her in his arms again, then he knew everything would be alright. The voices would quiet, and he would stop feeling so hot. He was so hot he thought he might die.

"Matilda, I can't find you!" He shouted, his voice bouncing and echoing around a space that suddenly seemed cavernous. The mist was thicker, almost soup like, and he thought he might drown inside it.

"I'm right here." Matilda's voice was behind him. He turned around and she was in front of him. Her hair seemed longer than it was before, and she was no longer wearing any clothes. She was bare, astonishingly pale, as if

her skin was made of moonlight. Suddenly the dancers were gone, the air was cold and crisp, and he knew, instinctively they were alone and safe.

“Do you still want me?” Henry whispered, brushing a finger down her cheek. It was as soft as a petal.

“What do you think?”

Matilda put a hand behind his head, pulling his face towards her and his lips down against hers in a crush of sweet breath and racing heartbeats. Henry had the feeling that he was suddenly without clothes too, that their skin was meeting and melding in an overwhelming warmth and pleasure that was too much for him to bear. He was pulling her down on the ground, which was no longer a hard ballroom floor but soft, giving moss. The kind of moss that had carpeted the woodland floor around the tree house they had so often played in. Were they at the tree house? Was that the shape of it above them? He pressed himself against her, the relief of her skin feeling like a thousand kisses at once. All he wanted was to be inside of her, he felt that if he was, he would finally feel the kind of freedom he had been chasing his entire life —

Henry jerked awake, his heart thundering out of his chest as he gasped, rubbing his hands over his face to dispel the edges of the dream. He had dreamed about *Matilda*. He had never imagined he would dream about Matilda. He swung his legs off the bed, dragging himself away from the hot tangle of sheets and blankets he had managed to get pulled under in the night. He rose, feeling the relief of the cooler air, and automatically crossed to the window, pushing it open and looking out onto the lawn. Dawn was a long way away. The moonlight filtered through the trees down onto the pond. Henry stared at it, remembering fishing in it with Althea when they were both children. He tried to think about all of the times he and Althea had enjoyed Matilda's company in their childhood. He tried to think of that small, lovely little girl who grinned at him and laughed at his jokes but even as he did, he felt himself slipping. How could he think of Matilda as a little girl now that he had dreamt of her, naked and wanting beneath him? He groaned and pressed his head against the cold glass. Matilda was his childhood friend! He had never even considered her this way and before tonight, if anyone had suggested he eyed her wantonly he would have laughed out loud. He didn't think of her like that. All reason denied it. Yet but here he was, his own lustful sweat cooling on his skin, not just thinking of her but longing for her. Soon they would be married.

“There can’t be anything wrong with a man wanting the woman he’s going to marry,” Henry muttered to himself, gently tapping his forehead against the window. He tried to believe it, but something didn’t feel right. He couldn’t quite believe that lusting after his childhood friend was anything other than a betrayal.

Chapter Thirteen

“Good morning, Lord Linfield, what can I do for you?”

Henry stared across the wide, mahogany desk at the Duke of Sinclair as he leaned back in his chair. Henry hadn't really thought before about what an intimidating man the Duke was. He was tall and impressive to be sure, but he also had a surrounding aura of strength and gravitas that Henry hoped to achieve one day. He self-consciously twirled his hat between his hands and coughed heavily. He had never had to ask for someone's hand in marriage before. He hadn't thought about how difficult it could be. He thought, in light of the complexity of the situation, it was probably best to be as direct as possible.

“I am hoping for your permission to ask for Lady Wynter's hand in marriage,” Henry said, suddenly feeling like he had perhaps worded that a little too bluntly. The Duke was looking at him with a blank expression so that, for a moment, Henry was unsure that he had heard him.

“You...want to marry Matilda?” the Duke asked slowly, leaning forward so stare at Henry intensely. He hadn't noticed how the Duke's eyes had an almost flinty quality to them. He felt an urge to try not to blink under such intense scrutiny.

“Yes, your grace, I do.” Henry made sure not to look away, or in any way reflect the kind of nervousness he was feeling inside.

“Well, this is a surprise,” the Duke said after a moment. “I wasn't aware that you harboured any affection for my daughter, outside of the usual friendship expected from childhood.”

“I have always cared greatly for her,” Henry said honestly. “It was only last night, however, in our discussion together, that I realized we

may enjoy a compatibility suitable to matrimony.”

Henry knew it wasn't the usual declaration of love that might proceed this type of proposal, but he knew the Duke valued practicality. Althea had revealed to him that morning over breakfast that the Duke was very concerned that Matilda marries so that her future was secure and protected. Whilst he might not be able to declare himself in love with his daughter, Henry could assure the Duke of his fidelity.

“I would take care of her, your grace, she would want for nothing with me,” Henry said, realizing as he spoke that of course Matilda was in a far stronger financial position now than he would ever be able to provide for her. The Duke's raised eyebrows told him the man was thinking the same thing. Henry ploughed ahead.

“I cannot promise as much wealth as I would wish to,” Henry said, hoping that honesty would be the best policy. “Not after my father's unfortunate endeavours, but you should know that I have my own funds that I maintain, and I flatter myself that I am a better judge of monetary matters than the man that raised me.”

Henry handed over an account of his various funds and expenditure. The Duke looked at it carefully, then laid it on the table. He said nothing for a moment and the Duke reached behind him for a brandy decanter and two glasses. He poured a nip into both and pushed a glass towards Henry who took it, warily. The Duke lifted his glass, holding Henry's eye, and then drank the brandy down in one gulp. Henry mimicked him, grateful for the sweet warming liquid sliding down his throat.

“Now that we have shared a drink, may I call you by your first name, Lord Linfield?” the Duke asked.

“Of course, please call me Henry, your grace,” Henry said, grateful to be asked for this intimacy. Surely it was a good sign for his suit with Matilda.

“Please, call me Wynter,” he said. “That is how I am known to my friends, or Sinclair, if you prefer.”

“Very well,” Henry said uneasily. He did not think he would be able to think of the Duke as anything other than Duke.

“Henry, you are a promising candidate for my daughter,” the Duke said openly, resting his fingers against the account sheet on the table. “Even if you had not shown me this I would have known that you are a gentleman who is able to handle your finances and manage your debts. You have a sterling reputation in this matter, as well as other things.”

Henry caught the flash of meaning in the Duke’s eye. He was referring to Henry’s preference for female company and his reputation as a cad.

“I had not thought you amenable to marriage,” the Duke said.

Henry tried not to flush. *Be honest, but not too honest.* That was the piece of advice Owen had given him last night as they left the ball. There was no point in trying to hide what was already known all over the Ton.

“I have not been previously, but situations can change. I am more aware of the benefits of marriage now,” Henry said evenly. “I do not conceal why. My father’s actions have changed everything.”

“Then why my Matilda?” the Duke said quickly. “Why not another lady?”

“It is simple, really,” Henry said calmly. “Because whilst the idea of marriage with any other lady seems like a chore, with Lady Wynter it seems like it might be an adventure. I believe she will make me happy, and I believe I can make her happy too. She is my friend.”

The Duke stared at him for so long that Henry wondered if he might stop breathing with the anticipation. Finally, the Duke broke his gaze, looking out of the window.

“I believe you, Henry, and I think you would make a good match,” he said, “but there is one problem: Matilda is thoroughly averse to marriage.”

“She...has expressed some interest to me,” Henry said carefully. Matilda had told him to do this, but it still seemed uncomfortable. Yet the Duke’s eyebrows shot up and he grinned widely.

“She has? Good God!” the Duke shook his head, chuckling softly. “That girl is always surprising me. Well, let’s see how this plays out.

Matilda!”

Before Henry had a moment to think, the Duke had walked to the door and was calling down the corridor.

“Matilda! Frances! Would you join us?”

Henry took a moment to marvel at the easy informality of the way the Duke kept his house. It seemed like a house filled with love and comfort. He hoped he would have that one day, then, he realized, he would be having it with Matilda.

“What is it, dearest?” Frances said as she and Matilda entered. Henry took a moment to appreciate Matilda’s lovely appearance. She was wearing a blue day dress with a simply white lace overlay, and he was suddenly powerfully reminded of the gown she had worn in his dream the night before. He had to look away, feeling his cheeks flush. *Not now. Do not think about that now.*

“Well, Lord Linfield here has come to ask for Matilda’s hand in marriage,” the Duke said, looking eagerly between Matilda and Henry as Frances gasped, gripping Matilda’s hand tightly. “I deem it to be a suitable proposal, but it would not be the first time I have approved a match only for you to dismiss it, Matilda, so if you would be so kind --”

“Yes,” Matilda interrupted her father, stopping him in his tracks. He stared at his daughter, blinking owlishly. Henry fought the sudden, absurd urge to laugh. “Yes, I accept his proposal.”

“Oh, my darling!” Frances gasped. “How wonderful!”

“You truly mean it?” the Duke only had eyes for his daughter. “You intend to marry this gentleman?”

“I do.” Matilda looked at Henry, smiling tightly. “I would be happy to.”

“My dear you never said a word!” Frances clutched at Matilda, her amber eyes filling with tears. “How long has this been a possibility?”

This was something they had not had time to plan. Henry looked at

Matilda, nodding lightly to indicate that he would go along with whatever story she invented.

“I...have always felt close to Henry,” Matilda spoke quietly, her eyes watching him carefully as if waiting for any signals that she was saying the wrong thing. “I had never imagined that I could enter into a marriage with someone who felt like my best friend, but when we spent time together last night...”

“...It just made sense.” Henry finished for her, glad of the way she had poetically and convincingly thought up a plausible courtship story. He gave her a flicker of a wink.

“This is wonderful!” Frances gushed, “but it is a very short time to adjust from friendship to romance. I think it is very important that you spend time courting before your wedding day.” Frances kissed Matilda’s hand, eyes shining. “You deserve those precious memories, my dear.”

“It would also perhaps be prudent, given that this wedding announcement might seem rushed following your previous unfortunate incident,” the Duke mused, eyes assessing Henry carefully.

Henry nodded, knowing that he needed to walk the balance between seeming compliant and also making sure that he protected himself from any further trouble.

“I agree, your grace, but I should appreciate your help in obtaining a special license for our wedding, so we can marry quickly,” Henry said. “You will understand that if there is someone out there trying to bring harm to my reputation, I am eager to ensure that your daughter is not dragged into it.”

“We appreciate that.” The Duke nodded. “It shall be done.”

“Now that the business is done, Matilda, why do you not take your betrothed to the drawing room whilst I talk to your father?” Frances said excitedly.

“Of course,” Matilda said neutrally, holding the door open for Henry.

He shook the Duke’s hand and smiled at Frances before following

Matilda wordlessly out of the room. As soon as she closed the door behind them, they could hear the outburst of laughter and happy talking as her parents celebrated. He saw Matilda allow herself a small moment of joy, smiling tightly before leading him down the hall to the drawing room. Once they were both inside she leaned her back against the door, letting out a long sigh of relief.

“Do you think it went well?” she whispered.

“I do.” Henry grinned. “Your father seems very happy.”

“I thought he wouldn’t believe me.” Matilda shook her head. “He’s so used to me denying him and rejecting his suitors.”

“Well, he didn’t reject me.” Henry couldn’t resist a slight boast. “He said he was happy with my suit.”

“Of course, he did.” Matilda rolled her eyes, unable to stop herself from smiling back. “Don’t let it go to your head, Henry.”

“I’m not sure I can,” Henry joked. “I’ve won the hand of the great Lady Wynter, after all. I think that might go to my head a little.”

“Have you won her hand or were you merely the only man to make her an offer that suited her needs?” Matilda tipped her head to one side, smiling suggestively at him.

“They sound like the same thing to me.” Henry shrugged. “I’m happy if you’re happy.”

“I’m happy,” Matilda said. Her voice seemed a little tight when she said that, and she looked away out of the window, moving from the door closer towards him. “I’m sorry that my mother forced a courtship upon us.”

“It’s alright,” Henry said, trying not to think about his dream the night before and how it had felt to have Matilda in his arms. *It was just a dream. Don’t be a fool.* “It seems important to her.”

“I imagine it is, but I think she might also be suspicious of the speed of our engagement.” Matilda sighed, twisting one of her curls around her finger thoughtfully. “She was gripping my hand so tightly. I think

she might be hoping to gain the measure of our affection for one another, to test if it is genuine.”

“So, it will be important for us to demonstrate affection,” Henry mused and Matilda nodded, her eyebrows creasing slightly.

“Yes, we shall have to convince them we are falling in love, I think.” Matilda bit the inside of her lip, eyes filled with worry. In his dream, her lips had been as soft as velvet. *Stop it.*

“I think we can do that,” Henry said. He could hear footsteps coming down the hallway and had an idea. It wasn’t perhaps the most gentlemanly idea he’d ever had but it was too compelling to ignore.

“Come here.”

He grasped her arms, pulling her gently into the circle of his warmth and tilting his head down towards hers.

I’m not doing it because I’m attracted to her, I’m doing it because it makes sense for our ruse.

Matilda’s bright blue eyes widened in surprise as she realised what this movement meant. He felt her stiffen, her breath hitching in her throat. It was a light gasp, a clicking sound that only he was close enough to hear. There was a strange intimacy to it, and it built a warmth in his stomach, flushing down to his groin. He felt a surprising tinge of lust.

“What are you doing?” Matilda whispered breathlessly, even though she could see full well what he intended. The most delicious blush was starting in the apples of her cheeks. Close to, she smelled fresh and delightful, like a spring garden after rain. *I wonder if she tastes as good as she smells.*

“Creating an illusion.” Henry stroked a finger down her blushed cheek. It was smooth, like satin. He swallowed hard. “Now look deep into my eyes, remember, it must be convincing.”

“What must be?”

Matilda’s voice was so quiet Henry would not have heard it if his own

lips had not been mere inches from her own. They were so close he could taste her breath. His own heart was thundering. He couldn't turn back now. He didn't want to.

"Do you trust me?" His eyes flickered from her slightly parted, trembling lips to those wide, expectant blue eyes. She had to know what was coming. This was the moment for her to pull away if she truly wanted to. He held his breath. She breathed in sharply through her nose and then her eyes dropped down to his own lips, cloudy with desire.

Yes.

Henry didn't have the restraint to wait for her answer. His lips met hers just as the door handle creaked. *Soft, like velvet.* He had expected her to stiffen further, the strange invasion of a man's lips on hers for the first time making her wary, but she didn't. She melted.

Oh.

Her mouth fit his and her body sighed against him and Henry forgot for a moment that this was all a performance. He found his other hand was suddenly holding her hand, their fingers interlinked. Her other hand was pressed against his chest, her fingers warm over his heart. The moment seemed to stretch, blissful and soft, all the world reduced to the smell of Matilda and the taste of her lips: fresh daisies and honey. Then, the door opened, and they heard a surprised voice in the doorway.

"Oh, excuse me!"

They pulled apart. Henry felt a tug of reluctance in it and a strange annoyance towards their interloper, even though he had planned it down to the moment.

"Your horse has been brought around, Lord Linfield," Frances said, giving them both a knowing glance. "You should go to your father, Matilda, he has much to discuss with you."

"Yes, Mama." Matilda stepped away from Henry, blushing deeply. She wouldn't catch his eye as she left the room. He wondered if she felt he had gone too far, taken liberties and therefore lost her trust, but then there had been the way she had responded to his kiss. *I wasn't*

expecting that. Even though this had all been his design, he hoped he hadn't upset Matilda, but with sad resignation he saw wary confusion on her face. He hadn't given her time to answer his question. If she had trusted him before it was clear she trusted him less now. He didn't say anything as she left, for what could he say? Once the door was closed, Frances looked at him with a hint of reproach in her eyes.

"Well, Lord Linfield, we shall certainly need to...move things along, will we not?"

Frances raised her eyebrows. Despite risking Matilda's opinion of him with his actions, Henry thought that their display might have gone a long way to securing their engagement. He felt a rush of sweet achievement, followed by a quick dose of guilt that it had been, at least in part, at Matilda's expense.

"I think that would be wise, your grace," Henry said, doing his best to look subdued to have been caught and a little love struck. The Duchess must believe him to be in love.

"We shall expect you on the morrow then," Frances said, stepping aside to let him out. "And I shall speak with my husband about the special license as a matter of urgency."

"Thank you, your grace." Henry bowed carefully. "Please give my regards to Lady Wynter."

He walked away down the corridor, trying to shake off the slimy feeling he had, as if he had taken advantage of the situation, but he had only done what was necessary. Now Frances would be convinced of their affection and move quickly to ensure Matilda didn't jeopardise her virtue or reputation any further before she was wed. It was a move of self-protection, to be sure, and maybe it had been ungentlemanly not to discuss it with Matilda in advance, but he knew it was for the best. For both he and Matilda. Of course, kissing her had nothing to do with his need to know if she tasted the way she had in his dreams. It had nothing to do with how, since the moment he had woken, gasping and astonished, in the cold morning he had found himself itching to have her in his arms. It had nothing to do with that at all.

Chapter Fourteen

“*M*atilda? Darling?”

Matilda turned around at her dressing table to see her mother standing in the doorway, dressed in her night dress and night coat, her red hair loose and curling around her face. She was clearly intent on an evening chat. Matilda sighed heavily, setting down her hairbrush. She had been expecting this visit since what had occurred that morning. Frances had walked in on Henry and Matilda’s kiss. Their *first* kiss, Matilda realised, with a jolt of her heart. The implications of their courtship and future marriage were that there would be many more. Her cheeks reddened at the thought.

“Yes, Mama?” Matilda said, nodding for Betty to braid her hair as she did every evening, but Frances stepped forward, waving Betty away and standing behind Matilda.

“Thank you, Betty, that will be all,” her mother said, smiling at her maid. Matilda felt a knot of anxiety tightening in her stomach. If Frances felt like this was the kind of conversation that could not be overheard by their most intimate servants, then it would probably be a serious conversation. Matilda waited until Betty had left, holding her breath, and then met her mother’s eyes in the mirror.

“Are you angry with me?” Matilda asked in a small voice.

“No, of course not, sweetheart,” Frances shushed, stroking her hands down Matilda’s silky tresses. “Yet I do believe there are some things we must discuss.”

“Alright.” Matilda twisted her fingers together in her lap as her mother began dividing her hair, twisting it gently into braids. She waited for her mother to speak. She knew she might have to make

account for her behaviour but she had no idea where to begin. After all, it had not been her idea for them to kiss. Even if it had arguably been the best moment of her life.

“We have had a message delivered from Lord Linfield this afternoon,” Frances said after a moment of quiet.

“Oh?”

Immediately Matilda’s heart began to race. Had Henry changed his mind about their arrangement? How would she possibly explain it to her parents? Also, would she feel relieved or heartbroken if he did? Part of her was afraid of further intimacy with him, worried that he would uncover the secret of her role in the scandal at the church, but another part was terrified of losing him. Loving Henry had been a burden she had borne for so long. This might be her only chance to make her dreams a reality.

“Do not look so frantic, dearest!” Her mother squeezed her shoulder tenderly. “He has not rescinded his offer. He has merely asked if you would prepare for a ride tomorrow when he comes to court you.”

“Oh.” Matilda felt strange hearing the word ‘court’ spoken out loud. Henry was coming to court her. She had wished for those words for so long. “I think I should like that very much.”

“I am sure he knew that you would,” her mother said. “Since you are fond of riding. He seems to know so much about you. I had no idea that you shared such ...intimacies with him.”

Matilda flushed. She knew her mother was not really talking about riding.

“Henry and I have been familiar for a long time.” Matilda fiddled with the perfume bottle on the table, pulling at the slightly frayed ribbon around its neck. “We were best friends as children.”

“I understand, but there is a difference between knowing a boy and knowing the man he grows into.” Frances’ amber eyes were bright with intensity. “A very great difference.”

“Henry would never hurt me,” Matilda repeated what he had said to her at the ball, trusting that it would sound convincing.

“Of course, he would never do so intentionally,” her mother reassured, eyes comforting, “but Henry Linfield is a man of the world. He is not without experience and experience comes with certain expectations. Certain reputations.”

Oh Lord. Matilda reluctantly caught her mother’s eye and saw the significance there of her words. Did she think Henry a cad?

“I suppose you have heard things about him?” Matilda said brazenly. Since they were going to speak of it, it seemed best to her to be as clear as possible, even if it was very awkward. “Terrible rumours about girls and wives and all of that? Well, none of it is accurate.”

“I hear everything,” Frances said flippantly, and Matilda knew that was true. Her mother was a societal force to be reckoned with. Not much went on in the upper echelons of the aristocracy that she did not hear a rumour of it. She and Holton were a much-feared team when it came to hunting out secrets — Holton listened out for whispers below stairs and Frances could always winkle out a scandal from even the most dignified of lips. There was no point in trying to deny that Henry had been with many women in town. After all, if even that poor sap, Tallulah Fortescue, knew of it there could be no doubt the Duchess of Sinclair had heard it first.

“Just because a man has a past does not mean he should be vilified,” Matilda said stoutly, daring her mother to say otherwise.

“I know that better than most, my dear,” Frances reprimanded gently. “Do not forget both your father and I had our own pasts to contend with when we were wed.”

Of course. Matilda knew that her father had obviously been married before, but she often forgot that her precious Mama had in fact been promised to another man when she accepted her father’s proposal. Society had been forgiving of the scandal since the other man in question had borne no animosity and had quickly married elsewhere, and also her father’s fortune and status had dispelled many ill-wishers. Still, it was a part of her parents’ courtship that was not generally remembered or discussed in polite society.

“So, then it would hardly do to judge poor Lord Linfield on his past, or the rumours circulating about that trumped up ‘hidden wife’ scandal,” Matilda said, hardly wanting to spend much time on this topic, since

she was the origin of that particular scandal.

"I do not judge him for his past, only for his present," her mother said in a dangerously soft tone. "I shall not forgive an experienced gentleman who leads my daughter into a situation she is not prepared for."

Oh dear, there were those leopard eyes again. Matilda dropped her own gaze respectfully, not wanting to light the fuel of her mother's ire. She sat in silence as her mother tied ribbons on the end of her hair braids until she could bear the tense silence no longer.

"You think I should not have kissed him," Matilda said finally. "Or allowed him to kiss me. I have let you down."

"Oh Matilda, you have not let me down!" Her mother sighed and sat beside her on the vanity seat, pulling her braids forward over her shoulders and cupping her cheek affectionately. "I understand the rush of infatuation, the desires you might be feeling can be so strong, the lust so consuming. I know that when I was with your father —"

"Please Mama." Matilda blushed, wishing they didn't have to talk about this. "This is too embarrassing."

"Well, if you didn't want to be embarrassed then you should not have engaged in behaviour that you knew would embarrass you," her mother scolded. Matilda bowed her head, accepting her rebuke.

"Yes, Mama," she said meekly. *God, please let this conversation be over soon!*

"Darling, I fear I must be more direct here than you would like me to, but the circumstances press me," her mother said, reaching out to take Matilda's hand. Frances did look unusually worried. Matilda's stomach flipped. Was her mother about to demand that she renege on her commitment to Henry?

"What circumstances?" Matilda asked, holding her breath.

"The speed of your engagement, Lord Linfield's desire for a special license, your intimacy this morning in the parlour." Her mother looked at her intently, the way she always did when she was trying to ferret out a lie in her children. "I must ask, I am compelled to ask:

have you allowed him liberties before that now behove you to marry him?"

"Good lord, Mama, no!" Matilda yanked her hand away, staring at her mother in amazement. "How can you ask such a thing of me?"

Did her mother really think that she had shared unacceptable intimacies with Henry and was now trying to cover up a scandal? *Well, I am, but it is not that scandal! I am only trying to hide the fact I ruined his engagement.*

"It is not beyond the realms of possibility." Her mother was unfazed by her objections and held her gaze steadily. "You have been adamantly against marriage and then, after only one ball —."

"You truly believe I would give away my virtue in such a manner?" Matilda demanded. "You think me no better than those light skirts who follow a man down the dark walk? You think I would be so utterly foolish?"

"I think that when one believes oneself in love, anything can happen." Her mother smiled at her sadly.

"Well, I don't know what other girls in love allow, but I would not allow that," Matilda stated, her cheeks flushed red. *I might be in love with Henry, but he is not in love with me.*

"Yet you allowed him to kiss you," her mother reminded her gently. "And you did not look like you were ready to stop him."

Matilda had nothing to say to that. When Henry's lips had met her own, it was like staring into the sun. She was blinded to everything that wasn't the taste of his lips and the touch of his hands. She let out her breath slowly, and looked down at her hands contritely.

"I shall be chaperoning you closely until the wedding." Frances stood up, laying a hand on Matilda's shoulder softly. "I am glad that he makes you happy, but you must exercise caution."

"Did you exercise caution?" Matilda couldn't stop herself from asking argumentatively. She remembered how Frances had thrown caution to the wind to care for her father when he was sick, never leaving his bedside, even though they were not even courting.

“I was a nobody.” Frances smiled wryly, kissing her daughter’s head. “I was not the daughter of a Duke and I was not promised to a Lord who was the focus of the Ton’s attention. Many people will be watching in ways you cannot begin to imagine, darling. It might not seem fair but it’s the truth.”

Matilda knew she was right. Being Lady Wynter, second heir to the duchy of Sinclair, had many implications. This was one of them. Her every move was scrutinised. She was sure that was why Henry had kissed her, relying on that scrutiny to secure his suit. Well, it had worked. She nodded reluctantly, and reached up to touch her mother’s hand, holding her amber gaze in the mirror.

“You were never a nobody, Mama,” she said. “You were always inimitable.”

“As are you.” Her mother smiled broadly and pressed a gentle kiss to her head. “Do not forget it.”

Matilda waited until her mother had left the room and then allowed herself to let out a long, deep breath, resting her elbows on her vanity table and putting her head in her hands. She couldn’t quite believe that her own mother was so suspicious of her sudden connection with Henry that she had thought her daughter’s virtue was compromised! However, it also showed that Henry’s little plan to give a convincing performance of affection had definitely worked. Her mother was absolutely convinced she was in love with him, or at least in lust. The plan was proceeding as they’d hoped, but Matilda couldn’t help but feeling overwhelmed by it all. Was she really doing the right thing? Their arrangement was entirely false, and she knew he didn’t love her, but her reaction to their kiss had been entirely too real. If she thought she had loved Henry before, it was nothing to what she felt now, knowing the softness of his lips and the earthy, fresh scent of his hair. Matilda sighed heavily, thinking of their ride tomorrow. She could already feel her stomach turning. She glanced at her bed ruefully. She knew she wouldn’t be getting any sleep tonight.



Henry was trying very hard not to stare at Matilda as they rode away from Sinclair house, her mother following them at a discreet distance. He didn’t know how she was doing it, but every time he had seen her since he had dreamt about her she was wearing that same blue colour

that reminded him so powerfully of his dream. Today it was a cornflower blue riding habit and despite being made of a heavier fabric and sporting a high-necked pelisse, Henry found that he kept imagining her body beneath it. All soft lines of a silhouette and curving flesh that was enticing to the touch. He swallowed hard, shifting his hands on his reigns. *Stop it. Stop thinking about her that way. It's entirely inappropriate.*

"I'm glad we were able to do this." Henry cleared his throat, smiling tightly at Matilda as she rode beside him.

"So am I." Matilda smiled politely back at him. He could see the way her eyes darted uncertainly back towards her mother riding behind him. He thought she was probably a little wary of him now after their kiss. He nudged his horse a little closer to hers and leaned down to her horse's bridle.

"The leather is twisted here," he said loudly, glancing back towards her mother to make sure she was buying his distraction, but the Duchess was enchanted by a doe and her fawn in the next field.

"It looks fine." Matilda frowned, but then her eyes widened as Henry used the bridle to pull her horse closer. "Henry?"

"Did your mother give you trouble about our little performance yesterday?" Henry asked quietly, stroking the horse's nose.

"No, not really." Matilda kept her back rigid, her hands clearly on her reigns where her mother could see them.

"I don't believe you, Tills." Henry wiggled his eyebrows at her, trying to lighten her up. He knew he had some trust to rebuild here. "Tell me."

Matilda bit her lip and looked over her shoulder, but her mother had moved her mare closer to the fence to watch to the grazing deer, so Matilda turned back to him.

"She thought we might have been...compromised," Matilda whispered. Henry's heart twisted at her words. *Compromised.* He immediately thought of his dream, of the taste of her lips and the unimaginable softness of her naked skin. Then he saw the dejected look in Matilda's eye. He had made a choice for both of them when he

kissed her and then left her to deal with the consequences.

"I am sorry she thought that, I am sorry that I put you in that position, I should have thought..." Henry swallowed. It can't have been pleasant to have had that conversation with the Duchess. He winced just imagining it and then looked back up at Matilda.

"Do you forgive me?"

None of this would work if she didn't trust him, at least a little. Matilda regarded him with hesitant eyes. She had always had this way of making him feel like she was looking into his soul. She must get it from her father. Henry tried not to blink.

"Of course, I do." Matilda sighed, smiling at him with a hint of her usual candour. "We might just have to refrain from any further performances until after our wedding day. However, I suppose the upside is she is very much convinced we are infatuated with one another."

"Good," Henry said. He saw out of the corner of his eye that the Duchess was looking at them and guiding her horse back onto the track. He pulled back from holding the bridle of her horse. "It seems fine now."

"Thank you," Matilda said primly, smiling broadly at Henry as he sat back on his horse and they began their slow walk along the ridge on the Sinclair estate.

"I can't tell you how grateful I am you accepted my proposal," he said, his voice raised a little higher than necessary, so it travelled back to her mother. This was the kind of thing an engaged man said, wasn't it?

"I can't tell you how grateful I was for your proposal," Matilda countered properly, and they rode in silence for a few moments, watching the deer gallop across the fields. Once again, Henry was reminded of how easy it was to be in silent companionship with Matilda. He felt like he could ride with her, read with her, sit with her, eat with her, and never say a word but still never be lonely. It was a rare gift, he thought. Yet today he wanted more than silence. When Henry was sure that Frances was once again distracted by the scenery and content with their display of appropriate courtship, so

much so that she had allowed the distance between them to stretch a little, he allowed himself to resume a private conversation.

“You love to ride here, don’t you?” Henry asked, watching the way Matilda’s face softened as she watched the beautiful scenery pass them.

“I do, Shakespeare does too.” Matilda petted the neck of her beautiful stallion.

“You named him Shakespeare?” Henry smiled in amusement. “You were always fond of *Twelfth Night*. I recall you spent a summer pretending to be Viola.”

“Well, Viola had many benefits pretending to be a boy! I could climb trees and make sailboats, it was wonderful.” Matilda giggled. “You seemed to enjoy the comedies too.”

“Oh goodness, I only read them because you insisted on quoting them endlessly.” Henry rolled his eyes, remembering Matilda’s tattered copy of Shakespeare’s plays that she had been obsessed with. One summer they had bored Althea, Medea, Julia and Barty nearly to tears with their endless recitation of *King Lear*.

“Well, I liked to imagine the different places they were set. Verona, Padua, Ephesus...” Matilda looked wistfully at the skyline. “I have always dreamed of travelling.”

“I know.” As long as they had been acquainted, Matilda had pestered him about travelling, unable to quell her envy that he would see all the great monuments of Europe whilst she was forced to stay at home.

“Hey, do you remember how you worried that the Coliseum would have crumbled away before you had a chance to see it?” Henry joked.

“I do.” Matilda’s eyes lit up at the memory. “You promised you would come back and tell me all about it.”

The unspoken rebuke sat between them. Henry had gone away to Europe and he had not set eyes on her until the Reading ball two nights ago.

“Well, it was still there,” Henry said, grinning at her. “It was crumbly, I have to say, but very impressive. Though Owen found it entirely dull and moaned the whole day — he had a dreadful headache from our explorations the night before.”

“Oh, I can only imagine.” Matilda rolled her eyes, but he saw the sparkle of interest there. “I am surprised he was not taken ill right there in the dust of the arena, for all the good Italian wine you must have been drinking.”

“I can assure you that Owen was not drinking good wine.” Henry pulled a face. “The Greeks make a wine with resin in it, and he took a liking to it in Ephesus. Lethal stuff!”

“I have heard of it.” Matilda laughed. “I have read of it. They seal the vessels with pine resin, is it not pleasant?”

“I do not find it so,” Henry said, “but perhaps you might, if you ever get a chance to try it.”

“I should like that. Tell me more of Rome. Did you see the Forum too?” Matilda asked eagerly. “The place where Caesar was stabbed? Did you act out ‘*Et tu, Brutus?*’ with Owen?”

“No, I did not!” Henry laughed, his heart warmed by Matilda’s excitement. He hadn’t felt sorry for her when he was a callow youth, but seeing the longing in her face now, he regretted that he had not brought all of his stories back and laid them at her feet immediately. How she would have relished them!

“Owen was more fascinated by the society in Italy rather than the history,” Henry confessed. In truth, he had more memories of the two of them gambling and drunk than he did of the ancient monuments. It was the first time he felt regret over it, now he could not recall every detail perfectly to tell Matilda.

“Well, that is a missed opportunity,” Matilda huffed. “Next you will tell me you did not act out ‘*Wherefore art thou Romeo?*’ in Verona.”

“Well, I had no fair maiden to recite it with,” Henry countered, unable to stop himself leaning his body over the small gap between their horses to nudge her shoulder.

"I have no doubt that Henry Linfield could have put his mind to finding one," Matilda shot back, wiggling her eyebrows. "Whatever city he found himself in."

A delightful flirtatious flush was building in her pale cheeks. Henry remembered how shocked he had been seeing Matilda flirt with Owen at the ball. Now he was on the receiving end of it, it just felt like an extension of their friendship. They had always been like this, hadn't they?

"I am flattered by your belief in my skills." Henry grinned. "But perhaps we shall just have to go Verona together and complete my tour to your satisfaction."

"Do you mean that?" Matilda turned her head fully to look at him, real surprise in her eyes. "You would take me to Europe? You do not think you would bore of my company?"

In a flash, Henry imagined Matilda tugging his hand as she hurried to the ruins at Rhodes, laughing with the sunlight in her hair. He couldn't imagine anything less boring than seeing his friend's delight in those ancient places.

"I am sure you would be a better travelling companion than Owen was." Henry laughed. "And I can honestly think of no one who would enjoy it more, and what can be better company than that?"

As Henry spoke the words he realised he believed them.

"Well, it sounds like it would not be challenging to be a better travelling companion than Lord Barton," Matilda snorted, rolling her eyes again. Henry grinned. He loved it when she did that. "All I would have to do is not become infatuated with local beverages and actually pay attention to the historical vistas."

"And quote Shakespeare at every opportunity," Henry added. "I shall have to structure our trip around the locations of his plays."

"And how shall your account for the mysterious Isle on which the Tempest is set?" Matilda challenged.

"Well, I suppose Sicily or Crete might do well enough," Henry pretended to muse, enjoying Matilda's giggles. "If I find myself a

magical staff and you a crown of flowers to be the spirit of the air.”

“Oh yes, and I shall absolutely demand a balcony from which to cry for my lover in Verona!” Matilda laughed. “You shall have much organising to do.”

“I think it will be worth it.” Henry grinned at her smiling face. “As long as I am permitted the chance to respond to the amorous cries.”

“Well, who else?” Matilda laughed. “I should hardly like to declare my undying love to an unknown Italian!”

“I should hope not,” Henry said in mock consternation, making Matilda throw back her head in laughter. He had missed that musical giggle. It made him think of waterfalls and trickling brooks.

“Matilda, we should go inside.” Frances’ voice interrupted their conversation and Henry looked around in surprise, realising that they had completed their journey back to the Sinclair stables. He had been so focused on Matilda he had barely noticed, just allowing his horse to follow Shakespeare without thought.

“Of course.” Henry dismounted easily, a little disappointed that the ride had come to an end. He had enjoyed the familiar, playful banter he had with Matilda. He couldn’t remember conversation with a lady ever being so easy, even though he rarely had trouble flirting. He found that generally the ladies he enjoyed the company of would return witty banter with giggles and fluttering of the eyelashes. Matilda was different: every joke had a counter, every witticism a sarcastic retort or droll eye roll. He couldn’t deny that it certainly made him feel closer to her again, maybe as close as he had done when he was a child. Perhaps that was the secret — they had been friends for so many years first. Perhaps this wasn’t really courtship or flirting but just friendship. Maybe he was misinterpreting it all.

Maybe that dream has got your head all twisted, Linfield. Get ahold of yourself!

“Oh, my boot is stuck.” Matilda frowned down at her boot in the stirrup. Despite the smooth leather of her riding boot, the edge of her pelisse had caught between the metal of the stirrup and the wood of the heel, lodging it in place.

“Let me help.” Without thinking, Henry moved to her side and dislodged the fabric, lifting her boot out of the stirrup. “Come here.”

He had offered his arms up to her before he had even considered it, and Matilda, dark eyebrows raised slightly had placed her hands on his shoulders. It wasn't until his hands were gripping her waist and lifting her down from Shakespeare's back that he realised how close she was. She smelled the same as she had done the day before, like springtime, but now he could discern some of the other scents beneath it: Bluebells and sunshine. Soap and a hint of musky sweat that was raw and enticing. Wouldn't the smell be stronger just behind her ear? What if he kissed her there? As he set her down in front of him, her body brushed against his, the firm swell of her breasts inside her gown and pelisse pressed lightly against his chest. His body stirred with unwanted desire. Without his volition, his mind conjured the image of her from his dream, naked and perfect in his arms. *Stop it. Stop it immediately. Her mother is right there!*

“Better?” Henry swallowed hard, trying his best not to look at her lips. Yesterday she had tasted like honey. Did she still taste like honey?

“Much better, thank you.” Matilda's eyes were flickering to her mother busy dismounting over his shoulder and then her gaze rested on his lips, too. Henry's stomach jolted urgently. She was thinking about kissing him! It was too enticing to bear. It took every ounce of self-control he had in his body to drop his hands from her waist and step back from her, bowing respectfully.

“I shall see you tomorrow, then?” he said softly, still unable to tear his eyes away from her beautiful face and sweet, red lips.

“Tomorrow.” Matilda nodded.

She seemed completely unaffected, the perfect lady, but as she turned her head to pat Shakespeare, he saw a climbing flush of pink behind her ear and up her neck. She was flustered. He had flustered her. The thought gave him unaccountable levels of satisfaction. He couldn't just leave it like this. He wanted more. He reached for her gloved hand and took it. Matilda jerked her head to look at him in surprise but didn't pull away. Keeping focused on her sapphire blue eyes, he bowed and kissed the back of her gloved hand. He felt Matilda's sharp intake of breath and his own corresponding tug of desire in the pit of his stomach. *Damn it.*

“Until tomorrow, Lady Matilda,” he said formally, letting her hand drop and turning to remount his horse. He didn’t look back at her as he rode away. He had hoped that the chaste kiss on her hand would put to bed his outrageous desires. He had hoped that it would show him that he didn’t really feel attraction for Matilda beyond the strange, erotic dream he had been preoccupied with, but that hadn’t been the case. He had kissed her hand and he had felt it. It wasn’t enough. She might be his friend and their arrangement might be purely mercenary for them both, but he couldn’t deny the truth. He wanted to kiss her again.

Chapter Fifteen

“How is your fiancée?” Owen asked, looking up from his gun as he loaded shot back into it.

“She is well,” Henry said, squinting up into the sky. “Pull!”

He raised his shot gun and aimed at the flying clay pigeon as it careered up to the clouds. He fired, and the clay shattered in the air.

“Good shot,” Owen commented. “So, why are you here speaking to me rather than enjoying her company?”

“I am taking her into the woods for a picnic this afternoon. We are going to see our old treehouse,” Henry said, watching Owen take another shot and miss.

“Damnation!” Owen cursed and then looked at Henry curiously. “You have a treehouse together?”

“Yes.” Henry nodded and lifted his shotgun to his shoulder. “We built it when we were children, before Oxford.”

“It sounds like she was your childhood sweetheart.” Owen grinned at him. “Did you never think to revisit it once you went up? Or after graduation?”

“She wasn’t my sweetheart, she was my best friend.” Henry fired and grinned back at his friend. “Before I met you, of course.”

“Missed by a fair mile, my friend!” Owen commented as the clay pigeon landed down the field. “You must be distracted by thoughts of your sweetheart.”

"I told you, she was just a friend."

"Yes, yes, just a friend." Owen rolled his eyes. "Yet you barely mentioned her to me in all the time we studied together, toured around Europe."

"That's because it was nothing of consequence to mention, Owen," Henry insisted, "and now we are just two people, good friends, making a marriage of mutual convenience."

"It sounds all very well when you say it like that, but you forget that I saw your face that night at the ball when I turned my legendary charm upon the Duke's daughter." Owen's eyes glittered with humour. "You were incensed, I could tell."

"Incensed?" Henry snorted, "I've never heard such rubbish."

"Well, maybe not incensed, but definitely discomforted," Owen amended, a small smile lingering at the edges of lips. "I know what you look like when you are roused, Henry. You disliked the flirtation she and I shared."

"It is because she is my friend!" Henry exclaimed, feeling an uncomfortable flush beginning under his collar. "I was merely being protective."

"No, no, no." Owen waggled his finger irritatingly. "I've seen you being protective of your sister's before, this wasn't like that. You were jealous of her. You forget that I've been warned off women you've liked before, Linfield. I know the signs."

"Foolish nonsense," Henry muttered, lifting the gun to his shoulder, but secretly wishing that Owen didn't know him so well. "Pull!"

Owen thankfully said nothing as Henry aimed and shot, letting his words linger in Henry's mind. Henry was grateful for it, and snorted happily when the clay pigeon exploded in the air.

"Lovely shot, my Lord," the gamekeeper commented, and Owen rolled his eyes.

"So, if you are only merely *friends*," Owen laced disbelief into the

word, making Henry frown at him. "Do you feel nothing for her when you look at her? For she is surely a beautiful young lady."

"Careful, Barton, that is my fiancée you are speaking of," Henry said, and Owen burst out laughing, slapping his back.

"Good God, Linfield, you cannot even hear a compliment for her on another man's lips! You say that she is just your friend? Has nothing changed since she was a mere girl and you a boy?"

"She is still an excellent friend," Henry said, then hesitated. "She is the same in essentials but she...yes, I suppose she has grown. Become more mature and wiser and..."

Henry thought of the way Matilda had bantered flirtatiously with him. How she had handled their arrangement with grace and sophistication. He thought of how her jewel toned eyes glimmered lusciously and her creamy skin flushed pink when she was flustered. Owen was right. Matilda was absolutely not a mere girl anymore.

"And beautiful?" Owen grinning, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively. "Perhaps currently the most beautiful unmarried lady in society? Aside from your own fair sister, of course."

"Yes of course she is beautiful, but she has always been beautiful." Henry ran his hand through his hair, agitated. He wished they didn't have to speak of this. It only made it even harder to forget his dream.

"Oh really?" Owen stared at him, as if this fact was the most interesting thing Henry had said that morning. Henry suddenly wondered if he had said too much.

"Lord, can you think of nothing else?" Henry snapped, not wanting to be baited by Owen. He checked the barrel of his gun and slammed it closed with a loud clap.

"Well, if you are not here today to confess to me your love for Lady Matilda, what are you here for?" Owen let his gun rest over his shoulder. "I know she will be much more scintillating company than I can offer."

"I wanted to discuss our investigation of the woman who attempted to destroy my first wedding," Henry said, letting the baited comment lie.

“Ah, yes, I see.” Owen pursed his lips and reached inside his coat pocket for a piece of paper. “This is the list you gave me. I have crossed out the names of those who so far have proven unhelpful to our search.”

Henry was hesitant to look at the list. It had been quite an arduous and unflattering task, to sit down and remember every woman who might have reason to have ire against him. The list was unfortunately long, and Henry couldn't help but be a little embarrassed. If it turned out that the sowing of his wild oats had brought this tragedy down on his family, then he would never forgive himself.

“You've crossed out nearly all of them!” Henry exclaimed, staring up his friend. “You've spoken to so many of these women already?”

“Well, many of them were in town and in such businesses where they are easy to locate.” Owen shrugged. “The last few are ladies you met on the continent, so are harder to contact. I will send messages to associates however.”

“I do not suppose you shall have those by the day of my wedding,” Henry sighed, handing the list back.

“Why?” Owen frowned. “I assumed you would wait until the Season was ended.”

“No, her father is to apply for a special license.”

“Good lord! You're moving fast aren't you?” Owen joked.

“I have no desire to give that woman enough time to ruin another of my engagements,” Henry said darkly.

“You do not want to embarrass Lady Matilda.” Owen nodded wisely.

“Of course, I don't,” Henry said, *it is the very last thing I would want*, “but it is also important that this marriage does not fail. Matilda's dowry will pay off my father's debt and save my sister's reputation, as well as my own.”

“Do not worry, my friend.” Owen smiled at him genially. “I will ensure that there is proper protection on the day, and remember that

with a smaller, specially licensed wedding it is less likely people will know about it.”

“That’s true.” Henry breathed a sigh of relief. His friend was good at knowing exactly what he needed to hear to feel better.

“And I shall be with you.” Owen smiled. “I shall be proud to stand up with you as your best man, especially when you are being wed to such a lovely young lady. I think she shall make you happy.”

“She’s a good friend, she’s always made me happy,” Henry said, shaking his head in bafflement at Owen’s comment. “That’s why we are doing it.”

“Goodness, Henry, I believe you might be acting obtuse on purpose.” Owen shook his head, smiling ruefully. “I am suggesting that she might make you happy in more ways than you can imagine.”

Henry thought that perhaps Owen might be right.

“Let us get safely married first.” He sighed heavily.



“It’s down this way, Henry,” Matilda called over her shoulder, walking down the slope to the brook in the woods.

“Are you sure?” Henry said behind her. “I could have sworn that it was by the other river.”

“It’s by this one, Henry, trust me!” Matilda laughed, turning around to watch Henry standing at the top of the slope, looking down with slight annoyance. “What’s the matter?”

“These are new boots and the grass is soaking. I’m likely to trip!” Henry complained, his picture the exact mirror of how Althea looked when something was not going her own way and Matilda giggled.

“Come on,” she said, unthinkingly offering up her gloved hand for him to grasp. “I’ll make sure you don’t fall.”

“My knight in shining armour,” Henry grumbled, wobbling slightly as

he landed his warm palm in hers. His hands were so large. She'd been astounded the other day when he had basically been able to wrap his hands around the whole of her waist when he helped her from the horse. She was grateful that her mother had trusted them enough to let them come down into the woods with only Betty as a chaperone. Both her parents planned to join them later with Barty for the picnic, and Matilda thought it was a good sign that her mother trusted her and Henry alone with Betty for an hour.

"Thank you, my lady." Henry bowed exaggeratedly low when they reached the bottom of the slope. "My new boots thank you also."

"New boots for our courtship?" Matilda teased him as they began to walk along the edge of the brook.

"Oh yes, well, I had to come correct, courting the Duke's daughter and all." Henry grinned, immediately moving to the edge of the brook to jump between the large stones protruding from the water.

"Well, you had best treat them properly." Matilda shook her head, watching Henry hopping along like he was a child again. "You were hesitant to walk down a slope, but you'll jump in a river? Typical."

"Typical of what?" Henry was balancing on one leg, his arms outstretched, a wide grin on his face. Goodness, it made her heart ache with sweetness just to see it.

"Typical of you, Henry!" Matilda laughed, pulling at his arm, trying to drag him back onto the path but he resisted, catching her gloved hand, and tugging back with a naughty glint in his eyes.

"I seem to remember that I was not the only one who enjoyed messing around in rivers." Henry tugged her harder, causing Matilda to stumble onto the wobbling stones Henry stood on, causing her to grab his arms for stability.

"Woah!" Henry laughed. "I wasn't expecting that!"

"You idiot! I'm wearing a gown!" Matilda shrieked, clutching at Henry tightly as they wobbled precariously next to the tumbling water.

"Stop panicking!" Henry laughed uproariously as he steadied her, his warm hands holding her upper arms tightly. "There we go, step back

up, easy does it...”

Matilda did so, letting her breath calm down and feeling a little trickle of regret when Henry’s warm hands left her. She was very glad her mother wasn’t here.

“There!” Henry stepped up to meet her, grinning down with such boyish pleasure it was impossible for Matilda to be mad at him for any length of time. “Nary a wet hem in sight.”

“You are incorrigible, Linnie Linfield,” Matilda grumbled in mock annoyance, sweeping up her skirt and marching off down the path.

“*Linnie*? I don’t recall ever sanctioning such a name,” Henry chortled, running to catch up with her, his hands held gamely behind his back in the manner of a proper courting gentleman.

“You very much did,” Matilda retorted, happy to be able to contradict him. “You said, and I quote ‘you can call me whatever you want.’ *Linnie*.”

“Well, I can hardly go back on my word.” Henry shook his head, “but Linnie hardly seems like a suitable name for one’s future husband.”

Future husband. They had been having so much easy fun as friends that Matilda had forgotten, for a moment, the sacred vows they would soon be taking in Church together. The thought of it made her heart race.

“I suppose not, but what is an appropriate endearment for a husband?” Matilda swallowed, trying to sound lighthearted. “Or for a wife, for that matter?”

“I don’t know, I have not heard many endearments flow between my parents.” Henry tilted his head. “I imagine I shall continue to call you Tills. What shall you call me?”

I shall call you ‘love’ in my heart. I shall call you ‘dearest’ like my mother calls my father and me. I shall call you ‘mine’ and wonder at my luck and happiness.

“I suppose I shall call you Henry,” she said finally, grateful that she

could see the outline of the treehouse up ahead.

“There it is,” she pointed.

“Oh yes.” Henry’s face broke into a warm smile as his eyes took in the old tree and the steps climbing up. “Do you think we might get up there?”

“Really? Have you seen my gown?” Matilda gestured downwards and then immediately regretted it as Henry quickly glanced over her apparel. She had deliberately chosen one of the new gowns her mother had ordered for her, a lavender silk dress with simple cap sleeves and lavender lace ribbon under the bust.

“It is very beautiful.” Henry grinned, “though I am surprised to see you out of your usual periwinkle blue fare, and I dare say it shall look even more beautiful up among the trees.”

Henry gave her that cheeky, lopsided smile that she found so difficult to say no to and unbuttoned his jacket, tossing it on the grass. Then he quickly turned and climbed the tree, swinging himself up the ladder with ease. Matilda felt her breath catch in her throat to watch him move with such strength and elegance. He was just as agile now as a man as he had been in his youth.

“Come on, my lady.” He grinned down at her, holding out his hand invitingly. Despite his fine waistcoat and shiny new boots, he looked so much like how she imagined a young hero in a Shakespeare play to look that she couldn’t help the twinge of excitement.

“You are being impudent,” Matilda called up, resisting the allure.

“I’m not the one with the tree climbing reputation.” Henry laughed. “Up you come! Or must I command you as my future wife?”

“Do you really think that would work?” Matilda said sardonically, even though her heart fluttered at his words. She would think it would be delightful to be commanded anywhere as Henry’s wife.

“Not really.” Henry grinned. “But what if I say please?”

He was going to kill her with his charm, Matilda was sure. If he had

been this charming when he was younger she had forgotten it. It was breathtaking and a little staggering. Still, she managed to hold onto herself.

“Betty, hold my shawl.” Matilda sighed, handing it to Betty, “and watch my skirts as I climb.”

“Yes my lady,” Betty murmured. “I shall keep an eye out for the Duke and Duchess also.”

“Thank you,” Matilda replied, stepping towards the tree. Betty was right. Her mother would surely not approve of this. “Here I come.”

Climbing the tree was wonderfully familiar. With one hand holding her delicate silk skirt away from the coarse bark, her feet fell into the familiar worn notches of the ladder they had made all those years ago, now slightly mossy with age.

“Ha! I should have known a delightful gown wouldn’t stop her!” Henry crowed above her.

“Quiet down or I’ll stop climbing,” Matilda growled, looking down at her boots on the ladder steps.

“Oh, come here, you little tree sprite,” Henry chortled, and Matilda saw a strong, tanned hand appear in front of her face, the fingers gesturing for her hand. “Let me help.”

They had been touching a lot today, Matilda noticed, as she let go of her skirts and slipped her hand into Henry’s, gratified by its strength and warmth as he pulled her up to sit beside him on the dry wooden floor. She was suddenly grateful it had not rained for a few days and the flat, exposed floor of the treehouse, which was really nothing more than a shelf built into the largest branches, had been dried and warmed by the sun. There was an old saying of her father’s: *once an accident, twice a pattern, thrice a habit*. This was the third time Henry had touched her since they had been out from under the watchful eye of her mother. Were they falling back into the old habits of their young friendship, when casual touch was frequent and utterly taken for granted? Matilda couldn’t stop herself from hoping for it.

“Lord, when I was younger it seemed so much higher.” Henry was glancing over the edge of the ledge. “I often worried that if you fell

you would certainly die, but I doubt you would have even sprained an ankle on that soft moss below.”

“I should still rather not do so,” Matilda said wryly, secretly touched by the thought he had worried about her as a child.

“Well then, don’t fall.” Henry grinned, shuffling to lean his arm against his raised knee. He looked deliciously relaxed like this, Matilda realised, with the sun in his hair and the sleeves of his shirt rolled up, revealing the blonde hair on his forearms. He looked out over the tumbling water, sighing heavily. “I love this spot.”

“Me too.” Matilda watched the afternoon sun as it basked over the trees and felt a tightness around her heart. “I shall miss it when I am gone.”

“I know.”

She was surprised to feel Henry’s hand laid on top of hers on the wooden planks. She looked at him curiously, but he was smiling at her gently. The touch, she realised, was not romantic to him, only meant to be comforting and friendly. The fact that it made her heart race like she was running was entirely her own fault. *Four times. More than a habit.*

“You know, I think you might like Glavensborne,” he said softly. “It’s not as luxurious as the Sinclair estate, but still. It is on the edge of the South Downs, it has beautiful woodlands, and the headlands are spectacular to ride to, all the way to the ocean, if you wish. I hope you shall like to live there.”

“Glavensborne?” Matilda frowned. “Where is that? I assumed we should live at your house in London.”

The Linfields had a townhouse in Grosvenor square that Matilda knew that Henry occupied. She had been preparing herself to leave the country and adjust to living in the city.

“Glavensborne is my own house in Haslemere,” Henry said smiling. “You don’t imagine that I have wasted all my savings and inheritance, do you?”

“And it is ready for us to take residence?” Matilda asked, feeling the

flutterings of excitement in having a new area of the country to explore, though it would not be too far away she could not visit Sinclair Manor in a day.

“It will be, hopefully.” Henry squeezed her hand comfortingly. “We may have to endure a few sooty days in London first, but you’ll be thundering over the South Downs on Shakespeare before you know it.”

“Thank you.” Matilda felt a tremor of gratitude and affection. She swallowed hard, knowing that she felt a little teary with it. He was being so kind to her, so kind she could hardly bear it.

Don't make me fall even more in love with you, Henry, I don't know if I can cope with it.

She let the familiar silence fall between them, the soft connection of their hands and the joined sound of their breath blending with the soft music of birds and the trickling brook. They watched the golden orb of the sun drop languishingly below the tree line, casting orange shafts of light directly into their eyes. They both closed them, basking in the warm glow. Matilda wondered if there was any peace like this, enjoying Henry’s company again, as intimately and sweetly as she had done as a child. Yet it felt like there was a gently clicking clock on it now, that soon, inevitably, they would be married and no longer just friends.

Nothing will change because we are married. That's why we're doing this because we trust one another just to be friends. Nothing will change.

“You could call me ‘dearest’ when we are married. Like your mother and father do.”

Matilda turned to stare at Henry in surprise. He hadn’t opened his eyes and the sun was making his blonde curls shine. She felt her heart jolting, as if he had somehow heard the unspoken wish of her mind: *I shall call you dearest.*

“Really?” Matilda swallowed, her throat suddenly tight.

“I shouldn’t mind. If you wanted.” Henry nodded, keeping his eyes closed. His hand was warm and heavy on top of hers. Matilda didn’t know what to say. She stared back at the horizon, closing her eyes

again, trying to push away her sudden, golden recollection of the taste of Henry's lips.

"Well, hello up there!"

A fond, amused call dragged them both out of their reverie. They looked over the edge to see her parents walking down the path, her father waving energetically. Matilda was grateful that from this angle, the placement of Henry's hand was hidden. She felt him carefully withdraw it as he reached up to wave back.

"Good afternoon, your grace!" Henry called jovially. "Just testing out our childhood carpentry skills! Luckily, they hold up to snuff."

"Excellent to hear." Her father laughed and Matilda was grateful to see that her mother was also smiling fondly. It seemed that coming across the two of them sitting casually together, clearly not touching and obviously just silently enjoying one another's company, had pleased her greatly. Perhaps her mother thought it was a show of great restraint on Matilda's part. She had no way of knowing that if Henry had tried to kiss her again, Matilda would have jumped at the chance.

"And I have more good news for you." Her father smiled up at them both, pulling a piece of paper out of his jacket pocket, lifting it up to them to show its familiar crest. "I have obtained your special license. You will be married this Saturday!"

"Wonderful," Henry called back, smiling at Matilda. "Here we go," he added quietly. "Are you ready for our adventure?"

"Of course," Matilda whispered back. *Now more than ever, Henry.*

Chapter Sixteen

“Are you ready?” Owen asked, standing at the altar beside Henry.

“Of course.” Henry nodded, trying to ignore the fluttering of butterflies in his stomach. “Is everything secure?”

“Completely. None of the wedding breakfast guests know the location of your wedding, and I have a man standing outside to prevent entry of any strangers.” Owen squeezed his friend’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, my friend. No one will interrupt your vows.”

“I hope you’re right,” Henry said grimly, unable to stop his eye lingering on the doorway, watching for the strange woman who had humiliated him before. They were standing in the little church on the Sinclair estate; a beautiful, ancient chapel that would only hold a small number of people, perfect for their intimate ceremony. The only people in attendance were the Linfield family and the Sinclair family, attended by their most loyal servant, Holton, and Owen who stood up as Henry’s best man. Althea and Medea were excited to be bridesmaids, and so the chapel itself was quiet. The only guests sitting in the pews were his own parents, the Duchess Sinclair, Holton and young Barty. The little boy was bouncing in his seat, eyes fixed on Henry.

“Are you excited to marry our Tilly?” Barty asked, brown eyes so much like his father’s. “Are you excited to be my brother? I will be Duke one day, I should be a very good friend to have!”

“Indeed, you should.” Henry laughed, kneeling down so he was eye level with the little boy. The Duchess looked down at her boy fondly. “I am honoured to be your brother, Lord Wynter.”

“Tilly won’t be a Wynter anymore.” Barty frowned, his little face furrowed. “She will be Lady Linfield, will she?”

“For now, she shall be.” Henry smiled at the young boy, “but just like one day you shall be the Duke of Sinclair, I shall one day be Baron Foley. Then your sister will be Baroness Foley.”

Henry could feel his parents shooting him resentful glances across the aisle. They both disliked talking about how their son and his new wife would inherit the title and lands, even though they were only maintaining possession of both thanks to Henry and Althea’s plan and the generosity of the Duke of Sinclair. Unlike Althea and Medea, Henry’s parents did not seem grateful for the intervention. Henry thought his father rather resented him for being able to rescue the family without his guidance. Though his resentment hurt, it hardly mattered to Henry now. When he was linked to the Sinclair family then he would be untouchable. Perhaps that’s what irritated his father so much.

“She shall probably like that.” Barty shrugged. “It is not as good as being a duchess, but it shall have to do.”

“Well, we never did plan for Matilda to be a duchess, sweetheart!” the Duchess laughed, ruffling her son’s ginger hair so he scowled. “We should like you to grow very old and inherit the duchy and pass it on to your son in turn! Tilly will be more than satisfied passing on the Foley line in her turn.”

Frances smiled up and Henry and he smiled back, trying to push down the lurching feeling of excitement and dread at her words. She was talking about having children, and Matilda bearing his line. He realised abruptly that he and Matilda had not thought to have a conversation about it in the last few days. Henry could admit he had been wrapped up in enjoying his time with her, reacquainting himself with the small quirks of her personality and the delightful way her cheeks dimpled when she smiled. *You fool. You should have asked her whether she wanted children! Of course, you should have discussed it.* As if sensing his turbulence, Owen pulled his arm and the two men stepped away, facing the altar.

“You did not have a conversation about inheritance?” Owen asked quietly.

"I did not truthfully think of it," Henry replied, staring at the gold cross on the altar. "I feel foolish to have overlooked it."

"I am sure it hardly matters, my friend. She agreed to marry you and she knows the implications of that. Siring an heir is simply part of the bargain." Owen looked over his shoulder at young Barty. "The heir of Sinclair is young, and she knows the danger of this. I am sure she will do her duty to make both of your families more secure."

Henry heard the logic in Owen's words, but then he thought of Matilda.

"Her goal out of our arrangement is to maintain her freedom." He sighed, running his hand through his hair. "I do not think she will think fondly of childbearing."

"Well, there are ways to avoid that and give the lady her freedom for a few years." Owen raised his eyebrows. "After all, if you are nothing more than friends then it should not be any trouble to hold back on your marital obligations, should it?"

Henry understood Owen's words and nodded, smiling curtly, and pretending to be unaffected, but his stomach had dropped in disappointment. Had he secretly been hoping to lie with Matilda? Had he been wishing for the opportunity to re-enact the sensual delights his subconscious had created in his dream?

"Here they come," Owen murmured, clapping Henry on the shoulders, and straightening his stock. "Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be." Henry swallowed heavily, feeling the tang of adrenalin at the back of his mouth. *I can do this, I can marry her and not touch her if it's what she wants. This is merely an arrangement between friends. Nothing more.*

"Unto the breach." Owen grinned, and together the two men turned to watch the bridal procession moving its slow way down the aisle.

Holy Lord in heaven.

Matilda was radiant. Her ivory satin dress was embroidered with lace and crystal flowers. She wore elbow length satin gloves and a diamond tiara pinned in her dark hair, the curls trailing elegantly

against the glowing skin of her neck. Her veil and train flowed behind her, watched carefully by Althea and Medea who walked behind her, carrying posies of lily of the valley. He noticed that Matilda had a sprig of the flower pinned into her hair, the white petals, and green stems lovely and vivid against her almost black curls. Henry felt a deep longing inside him and before he could really understand it, he heard himself think: *I want her more than any woman I've ever seen.*

"Damn." Henry breathed, and Owen gave him a sidelong grin.

"You are marrying a diamond of the first water." Owen nudged him gently. "You are a lucky gentleman."

"I am," Henry said fervently, smiling as Matilda and her father arrived at the altar and stood beside him.

"Hello," Henry said a little awkwardly as the Duke and Owen stepped back behind them, listening to the priest begin to pray.

"Hello," Matilda whispered back, so quietly only he could hear under the priest's intonations.

Henry couldn't help but glance down at her elegant throat and cleavage, her skin somehow seeming more lustrous than usual against the ivory fabric. She wore a sapphire necklace that he recognised as her mother's from the night of the Reading ball, and he noticed the way the gems rose and fell rapidly against the trembling base of her throat.

She was nervous. Henry felt a well of compassion and leaned slightly towards her, letting the back of his hand by his side rest against hers. She met his gaze in surprise and Henry tried to send a message of comfort with his eyes. Matilda smiled back softly. For Henry, the service seemed to pass in starts and jolts of time. At once a moment stretched before him, taking the ring from Owen's palm, feeling the slightly sweaty warmth of the gold, and sliding it onto Matilda's slim fingers, wondering at the coldness of her touch.

Then moments bundled together in quick succession: kneeling and rising and prayers and holy communion, answering questions when asked and speaking vows when prompted, the taste of the host dry in his parched mouth. Before he could really process, the priest had pronounced them man and wife and gestured for them to kiss. He saw

something like determination in Matilda's face, as if she was prepared for this final, worrying step of declaration in front of her family.

He didn't want their first kiss as man and wife to be stilted. He squeezed her hands softly and then put one hand against her cheek, shielding her slightly from watching eyes. Her eyes were astonishingly blue; like oceans and jewels and a summer sky, all at once.

"Do not be afraid, Tills," he whispered, leaning in to kiss his wife.



The moment Henry's lips met hers, Matilda knew that she had been completely wrong. She was a fool to tell herself that nothing would change between them. How could she just be friends with Henry and maintain the impartiality of their ruse when his words sent an intense shiver down her spine? When he whispered so gently, *don't be afraid, Tills*, before pressing his warm, firm lips against hers, she felt like she was melting from the inside out. She felt as if her core was entirely on fire. *I would go anywhere with you, Henry, I would do anything for you.*

"Bravo!"

They pulled apart to see their families clapping and Owen grinning at them both, applauding loudly. Matilda smiled shyly, thinking that she must be the colour of a beetroot at that moment. She felt blissful, as if she was walking on air, and then she looked into Henry's eyes. It wasn't what she expected. She saw relief there, and some tenderness, but none of the extreme affection that she felt towards him. She felt oddly raw, like the act of marrying him had tethered him to her and all she wanted to do was pull on that tether and draw them closer together, but she could already feel the strain of him pulling away.

Why did it hurt so much? She had everything she had ever dreamed of in this moment. Henry was holding her hand, looping her arm through his and smiling at their witnesses. She was his wife. *There is no other*, she had said to Betty only a few weeks ago, and it had been true. There was no one in her heart other than Henry, and she had thought that finally being his wife might fill that emptiness inside her, but now she felt even more empty.

It's because I am in love with him, but he will never be in love with me.

“Miss? Are you quite alright?” Betty asked. She had been waiting at the back of the church to check Matilda’s veil and her gown. Matilda glanced at her new husband, *her husband*, and saw how he had engaged both of their sets of parents in discussion, whilst Althea and Medea entertained young Barty. “Miss? My Lady?”

“What if he never feels for me what I feel for him?” Matilda blurted out in a tense whisper, unable to stop herself from spewing out her most frantic feels. “What if he never grows to love me, and I love him, unrequited, all of my life?”

“Oh, my lady!” Betty exclaimed, quickly turning her around so that she no longer faced the others and made a fuss of looking like she was fixing Matilda’s hair. “Do not despair, he cares for you greatly.”

“It is not the same,” Matilda whispered back glumly, trying to shake away the tears threatening to form in her eyes. “I thought it would be enough, I convinced myself it would be but now...to have him as my husband and not know his love?” Matilda shook her head, her voice catching in her throat. “It is unbearable.”

“No, my lady, no it is not.” Betty squeezed her hand hard, staring at Matilda intently. “You shall bear it, as you have borne anything else in your life. You do not know what he shall do, how your marriage shall be.”

“I know Henry.” Matilda took a shaking breath. “He has never wanted to be contained, never wanted his freedom curbed. It is why he chose me!”

“He chose you because you are beautiful, and wealthy and his dear friend.” Betty cupped her mistress’s face and looked at her tenderly. “Do not let your worries run away with you! Marriage is long. You don’t know what may happen.”

“It is a long time not to be loved,” Matilda replied bleakly, plastering on a false smile as Althea called her over to her and Medea, inviting her to walk the short stroll back to Sinclair Manor at her side.

“How do you feel, dear sister?” Althea smiled, hugging Matilda close. “I am so delighted to be able to call you that! Sister in name as well as in my heart!”

“Me too,” Matilda said, feeling a tightness in her chest. It was as if Althea’s happiness was suffocating her.

“Perhaps next Season I shall be married, too!” Althea enthused. “Then we can be married ladies together.”

“You desire to get married, Miss Linfield?” Owen was suddenly walking beside them, grinning his rakish smile. Even with the tightness in her chest, Matilda couldn’t deny that Owen Barton was good company. Althea seemed to think so too, blushing slightly as she tossed her blonde curls and looked at him flirtatiously. Matilda was struck with the realisation that Althea’s happiness was not all on her behalf — now that Matilda and Henry were married, Althea was free to flirt, to court and hopefully find a husband suitable to her new elevated status.

“Perhaps, Lord Barton.” Althea smiled, and then turned her eyes back to Matilda. “Then when I have my first child, they shall be of the right age to be a good cousin to your first child! Won’t that be lovely?”

Your first child. Matilda felt her stomach lurch with guilty anticipation. She instantly imagined a small child running along the same streams she and Henry had played by as youngsters, with Henry’s blonde curls bouncing on his head and her blue eyes in his face. She could see their future son as clear as day and could feel a swirling in her belly, as if he was already real and a surprising lurch of want for that future to become real.

It won’t be real. Henry didn’t marry me because he wants to settle down and bring an heir into the world. He married me because he wants to be free.

“Tilly, are you alright?” Althea asked worriedly.

Matilda found herself gripping Althea’s arm tightly, almost stumbling and falling under the heaviness of her thoughts.

“I find I am not feeling quite well,” Matilda whispered. She was even starting to feel a little dizzy and sick, and the impact of everything swirled around inside her.

“It is all the excitement of the day,” Althea assured. “Let us find you a seat in the ballroom, let Henry and your parents greet the guests.”

Matilda let Althea lead her up the great steps of the manor and into the ballroom, fending off the smiles and congratulations of the guests before seating her on a chaise lounge by an open window so the cool air could refresh her.

“Allow me to fetch you a glass of lemonade,” Althea said, pressing her hand into Matilda’s shoulder. “Medea! Sit with your new sister.”

Matilda smiled at the younger girl as she sat on the stuffed cushions, smiling shyly up at Matilda in wonderment. Despite Matilda’s lurching stomach, she tried to engage her new family member in conversation.

“You look very beautiful in your dress, Medea,” Matilda said.

“Thank you.” Medea pressed her hand against the blush-coloured gown. The silk had been picked by Frances to expressly flatter the rosy complexions of the Linfield sisters. Where Matilda’s skin was like marble, theirs was all peaches and cream. They always looked like the essence of May Day, whilst Matilda knew that sometimes her haughty, intimidating beauty was off putting for gentlemen. She hoped Henry wasn’t disappointed she wasn’t beautiful in the same classical way.

“I admit I am a little envious of your ability to wear such a colour,” Matilda smiled ruefully. “You and Althea are both such classic, English beauties. If you were to be flowers you would both be roses.”

“If we are roses then you would be an iris,” Medea said shyly. “The blue purple of their petals matches your eyes. They are strong and delicate in equal measure.”

“Oh, thank you, Medea.” Matilda was surprised by the compliment. She hoped Henry thought of her that way.

“I am fond of flowers and gardening,” Medea said, her cheeks pink. “I like your lily of the valley.”

“Thank you.” Matilda touched the flower in her hair. “It was to honour my mother. She loved them.”

“Tell me about her,” Medea said, and Matilda did so gladly. She was just beginning to calm down and feel a little less queasy when she heard a familiar, sneering voice approach.

“Congratulations, Lady Linfield. It seems you shall never be a duchess after all.”

Matilda rolled her eyes at Medea who giggled and turned to face her least favourite relative. Lulu was wearing a glamorous, heavily embellished blush and green dress which, though clearly expensive, Matilda thought to be quite ugly.

“Hello, dear cousin.” Matilda smiled up at Lulu, refusing to rise to her horrible comment. “May I introduce my sister, Miss Medea Linfield? Medea, this is my cousin, Miss Tallulah Fortescue.”

“Charmed,” Lulu said, her eyes flickering over Medea’s appearance and, finding no fault in the beautiful young girl, flicked back to Matilda. “I see you are already parted from your husband. Are you still so wayward that you shun expectations even on your wedding day?”

“No.” Matilda smiled through gritted teeth. “I was only taking a little air with my sister.”

“Lady Linfield was feeling unwell,” Medea supplied, even though Matilda wished that she hadn’t. She saw the way Lulu’s eyes gleamed at this hint of information.

“I am sure, it must be quite overwhelming.” Lulu’s voice was laced with insincerity. “After all, to marry a man you barely know, who has such a reputation, it must be more than enough to make a *good* lady feel faint.”

“And what reputation might that be?” Althea’s voice spoke behind them, and Matilda turned to see her new sister glaring at Lulu. Matilda smirked to herself. Lulu didn’t know what she was in for.

“Lulu, may I introduce my other sister, Miss Althea Linfield?” Matilda said. She saw a little flutter of concern over Lulu’s expression which was then plastered with a false smile.

“Oh, only the rumours circulating since his, ah, *last* engagement.” Lulu fluttered her fan and smiled icily down at Matilda. She knew that was not what Lulu had meant at all. She had been talking about Henry’s reputation as a womaniser, deliberately recalling the way they had spoken about Henry at Julia’s tea party.

"I would think such rumours had been put to bed today." Althea frowned, still glaring at Lulu, "and as for my brother being unknown to my new sister-in-law, you are clearly unaware of their long friendship that pre-dates their engagement."

"Of course, we are all so excited to see that friendship blossom to love," Lulu gushed, her eyes flashing dangerously, "and to blossom so quickly. What a joy for us all."

"Here sister." Althea pressed a glass of lemonade into Matilda's hand. "I have told Henry you are unwell. He says you shall soon be moving off to Glavensborne."

"Well, I shall leave you to enjoy your wedding day and wish you a safe journey to Glavensborne," Lulu said, fluttering her fan. "I am sure you shall have a *warm bed* at the end of it."

Rumour has it he has a new bedwarmer every week. Matilda remembered Lulu's words at the party and her gut twisted at the way Lulu was throwing those words back in her face now, implying Matilda would never be enough to hold the attention of a man with such tastes as Henry. She was deliberately digging her claws in where she knew it would hurt, baiting Matilda about Henry's past. She had no way of knowing, of course, that Matilda was worried Henry would prefer other women's company to hers, but the comment was successful none of the less. Matilda felt her panic rising again. She had to bite back a retort and set her jaw tightly, glaring at her cousin.

"Thank you, cousin," she said sweetly. "I am sure my *husband* and I will look forward to welcoming you and your family at Glavensborne soon."

It was the best retort Matilda could muster under the circumstances. Reminding Lulu that she was still unmarried, and that Matilda was now the mistress of a lovely, large family seat was revenge enough for the moment. It was not as sweet as the revenge Henry offered. He quickly appeared, brushing past Lulu without notice, even kneeling down at the side of the chaise lounge to speak to Matilda.

"Dear wife, are you well?" Henry pushed a piece of hair away from her face, looking at her with intimate concern. "Are you too hot? Have you need of anything?"

"I am quite well. My new sisters are caring for me with much attention." Matilda allowed herself the privilege of squeezing Henry's hand affectionately, seeing that Lulu was seething behind them at their casual display of affection.

"I think she is tired, Henry," Medea said sweetly. "Perhaps I can take her to retire for a little while before the cake is served? Then you can get away to Glavensborne before midday."

"That sounds just right, Dee Dee." Henry tugged one of sister's curls affectionately. Behind them, Matilda could see that Lulu was sulking, irritated to have been so easily left out of their intimate family unit by Henry. Matilda couldn't tell, but she thought from the slight tension in his jaw that he might have been doing it intentionally. She thought she even saw a flicker of a wink in her husband's eye. *Her husband.* She could feel the tightness of panic pressing down on her chest again. She needed to get out of this room, away from Henry and everything he was making her feel.

"I'll tell your mother where you've gone." Althea smiled down at them. "Medea, you go and keep Matilda company."

"No, no, it is quite alright." Matilda sat up, taking a sip of her lemonade glass. "I shall be well by myself."

"Are you sure?" Henry's blonde eyebrows knitted together. His arm remained on her arm.

He doesn't mean it, it's all a show, it's all a game. He doesn't love you and he never will.

"Yes." Matilda swallowed, trying to ignore the voice inside her as she stood and left the ballroom, not looking back at the group of Linfield siblings though she saw Lulu's satisfied smirk as she walked away. She had the horrible feeling that Lulu could sense the direction of her emotion. *Can she see that I am in love with him? Can everyone tell how hopelessly I've fallen for this man?* Matilda breathed deeply, smiling gratefully at her guests and holding herself together until she was able to close the door to the little parlour behind her and give herself some much-needed space. Only then did she lean against the door and let her breath come out in trembling gasps. *This wasn't how it was supposed to be.* She had never imagined that this would happen to her. That on today of all days, her most longed for wedding to Henry

Linfield, she would be standing alone, tears coursing down her face.

Chapter Seventeen

“Goodbye, dearest. Journey safely.” Frances held her daughter close. “You shall be greatly missed.”

Henry could see the tears in the Duchess’ eyes. He waited by the coach, smiling comfortingly at Althea and Medea who stood nearby with Owen, looking on with compassion. Medea looked a little teary and Althea maybe wistful, but neither girl was as saddened by Henry’s departure as the Sinclair family was by Matilda’s. Both Medea and Althea had become used to Henry’s absence; for Matilda’s parents, it would be a fresh, new wound. For Matilda also, Henry realised, noticing how her blue eyes glittered like diamonds with unshed tears.

“I love you,” Matilda whispered, kissing her mother, her father and then holding her brother close for a moment.

“Will I come to Glavensborne soon and ride the pony with you?” Barty asked, looking up at his sister in concern. He was clearly unfamiliar with seeing Matilda so vulnerable and glanced to Henry for affirmation. Henry gave him a tight smile.

“Of course, Lord Bartholomew.” Henry inclined his head to the young boy. “As soon as possible.”

He held out his hand for Matilda to help her into the carriage, feeling the way her whole body was trembling with repressed distress. He smiled gently at her and then looked back at her parents. The Duke had his arm around his wife’s shoulders, holding her close. He smiled encouragingly at Henry, but Henry saw the warning in his eyes. *Look after my girl.* Henry nodded back, deliberately holding the Duke’s gaze: *I will. I promise.* Then he climbed into the carriage to sit opposite Matilda, leaning a hand out of the window to bang on the side of the carriage. He watched Matilda’s face as they lurched away. She refused to look back, but he could see the wetness around her eyes. He wasn’t

sure how to comfort her but instinctively reached for her hand, surprised when she flinched slightly at his touch.

“Tills?” he asked softly. “Matilda?”

She took a long shuddering breath and smiled at him bravely.

“I am fine, Henry, don’t worry.” She squeezed his hand quickly but then withdrew, looking out of the window again with a quiet expression. Henry frowned. It was unlike her to withdraw from his touch. In the last week they had fallen back into the easy familiarity of their young friendship — casual touches, pushes and friendly shoves with jokes, hand holding at moments of intimacy. He hoped it wasn’t just a tactic she had been using to convince those around her that their courtship was serious. He would miss her gentle intimacy if she withdrew it, but he had no idea how to encourage it back. All he could think of was to simply talk and let her know that he cared.

“Betty will already be there,” he said gently. “She left as soon as the ceremony was complete. She will be getting herself situated with the housekeeper.”

“What is the name of your housekeeper?” Matilda asked quietly, still looking out of the window.

“Mrs York.” Henry smiled instinctively. “The house belonged to my father’s brother, Colonel Foley, who fell in Spain. Mrs York has been with the house since his time. She will look after us well.”

“Good,” Matilda said, but her face was still turned to the window. Henry couldn’t understand this sudden distance. Had she really been so put out by the comments of her sneering cousin?

“Shakespeare will be there already, too,” Henry continued. “I have an excellent horse master, he will take care of him well.”

“Thank you,” Matilda said, still speaking in that meek voice.

“When we arrive, we shall meet all of the staff and then there will be some time for you to settle in, I would be happy to give you a tour,” Henry continued to speak, trying to win her around without even knowing what had pushed her away. “Then later tonight we will have dinner together and then it shall be time for bed.”

“For bed,” Matilda echoed, her blue eyes flickering towards him quickly before veering away, and Henry suddenly felt like he understood. *She’s afraid of our wedding night.* Henry leaned back in his seat, his mind racing. He had no idea how he could possibly address this. He had absolutely no intention of making Matilda go to bed with him, but he had also not anticipated she would suddenly be so shy.

The Matilda he knew never backed down from a challenge, never failed to bat back a glib jibe with a clever witticism, but now it was like sitting with an entirely different girl. A subdued, quiet woman. Was this what she thought he expected from a wife? Did she believe this was part of the bargain? How could he possibly tell her to be herself without sounding like he was commanding her? His thoughts whirled away inside of him and he didn’t notice that the hour or two ride out past Reading had past him by in a mere blip. Soon, the carriage was passing the familiar woodland on the Glavensborne estate.

“This is our woodland,” Henry commented quietly, breaking the heavy silence that sat between them. Glancing at Matilda, he saw that she seemed even more anxious as the time had passed. She was picking at her nails, a sign from childhood that he recognised when she was nervous. He wanted to reach out and take her hand, just as he might have done when they were sitting in the treehouse as children, but he couldn’t do it now. Her reservation was holding him back. Instead, he just kept speaking.

“You can ride here with Shakespeare whenever you wish. There is a beautiful fishing pond on the estate as well. There is a small cottage for the groundskeeper in the middle of the forest, too.”

“Lovely,” Matilda said, though there was no real joy in her voice, just apprehension. The carriage trundled up to the main door of the house. Glavensborne was not as large a house as the Sinclair Manor, not even as large as Linfield Hall but it was a beautiful, Tudor era build with a delightful selection of land. Henry hoped that Matilda might be happy there if she could only get over her anxiety.

“Here we are,” Henry said as the carriage drew to a halt. The staff were arranged neatly at the door, their dark uniforms and starched caps standing out against the grey stone of the house. He opened the door and assisted Matilda down, holding her hand lightly. She didn’t squeeze it like she usually did. Henry felt a small gnawing ache of

sadness.

“Mrs York, may I present my wife, Lady Matilda Linfield.”

It was the first time he had used her formal title and he noticed the slight flush of discomfort in Matilda’s cheeks, but it didn’t stop her from smiling at the stout housekeeper.

“How do you do, Mrs York?” Matilda asked. “Is my maid arrived?”

“Oh yes, wee Betty is upstairs in the lady’s bedchamber.” Mrs York nodded, smiling genially. “Shall I take you up there, my lady?”

“I should like that.” Matilda shot him a nervous look. “I am still feeling a little unwell.”

“Of course.” Henry nodded. He never wanted Matilda to feel like she was forced into any behaviour or actions in the house. He had promised her freedom. He would make damn sure she got it. “Take as long as you need.”

Matilda nodded thankfully, and followed Mrs York upstairs leaving Henry standing alone in the house.



“What are you doing here?” Owen asked frankly, staring at his friend as he dismounted his horse outside the Barton estate.

“Well, I can hardly go to the club on my wedding day,” Henry said in a hard tone, tossing the reigns of his horse at the valet.

“No, you cannot.” Owen shook his head. “Go home, Henry. Go home to your wife.”

“My wife has no need of my presence!” Henry exclaimed, all of the frustration of the last eight hours bubbling over in scorching rage that he poured out in front of his friend. “She has no want or need of me, and so I am determined to spend my wedding day in the bottom of a bottle. Since I cannot go to the club for fear of causing a scandal, I thought I might do that here!”

“Come in.” Owen grabbed Henry by the sleeve and pulled him into the Barton house and Henry was once again, grateful that Owen’s country home was only an hour’s ride away from his. Owen pushed him into the parlour and into the comfy chair beside the fire, turning to pour glasses brandy for the both of them. He shoved one into Henry’s hand and then threw himself into the seat opposite.

“Talk,” Owen demanded, frowning at him heavily. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” Henry took a swig of the brandy, relishing the sharp, rich taste on his tongue. “Nothing that should be surprising when two friends marry for nothing but mercenary means.”

“What happened?” Owen asked, sipping his brandy slowly, gazing at Henry with a calculating look. “This morning you seemed happy. Excited, even.”

“I was,” Henry answered in a clipped tone, taking another swig of alcohol, and not wanting to think about how he had felt when he had seen Matilda walking down the aisle towards him.

“What happened?” Owen repeated.

“Nothing happened, Owen.” Henry laughed ruefully. “I merely thought that we should discuss the investigation.”

“Tonight? You want to discuss it tonight?” Owen raised his eyebrows. “What is the point?”

“What is the point? The woman ruined my reputation!” Henry exclaimed.

“A reputation that has, of this day, been restored.” Owen toasted him and took a sip of his brandy. “The Duke has settled your father’s debt with your wife’s dowry, and you are now permanently associated with one of the greatest families in the country. Why would you have need to pursue this?”

“What if the woman in question has designs upon my current happiness?” Henry demanded, feeling his frustration at Matilda’s withdrawn behaviour curdling to anger against his friend.

"I cannot imagine how it would matter. The Duke's influence is far too strong. You are untouchable," Owen said, irritatingly refusing to rise to his anger. "Besides, I cannot see that you are, at this moment, particularly happy."

"Good Lord." Henry rolled his eyes in fury. "Are you saying you will no longer investigate this on my behalf? Must I step in?"

"Settle down, Linfield, of course I shall continue." Owen sighed, setting his glass down. "Yet I do not believe you are really here to discuss this, I think you are here because of something that happened with Matilda."

"God, nothing happened." Henry sighed, setting his head back against the chair.

"I don't believe you."

"It's true!" Henry's eyes snapped back to his friend, frustrated by his disbelief. "Nothing has happened between us. I have not seen her all day."

"What do you mean?" Owen frowned.

Henry took another sip of his brandy. The liquid was warming him through. He had left before dinner, since Matilda had decided to stay in her bedchamber, and had rode to Owen's instead. On an empty stomach, the brandy was impacting him quicker than usual. He sighed heavily and decided to share the truth with his friend.

"Matilda has been holed up in her bedchamber all day, except for the two hours in which she went for a ride alone," Henry said flatly. "We've not spoken two words since we stepped over the threshold. I think she is miserable."

"She cannot be miserable, you have only been married less than a day," Owen said flatly. "If she is miserable, it must pre-date your marriage."

"She is miserable *because* of our marriage," Henry stated, swirling the brandy in his glass, trying to choke down the disappointment inside. "She wanted freedom and I trapped her."

"You didn't trap her, Henry, how can you think that?" Owen leaned forward emphatically. "You both made this decision for your mutual gain."

"She clearly feels no gain," Henry said. "Her first act as a wife has been to isolate herself and to pull away from me, going for these rides alone..."

"That worries you?"

"Of course, it worries me! She's my wife! Anything could happen. She barely knows the terrain, she doesn't understand the dangers!" Henry exclaimed, feeling a twist in his heart as he said the words. He had barely been able to hold himself back from following her, or sending one of his staff out to pull her back. In the time she had been out he had paced the parlour facing the grounds until she returned, hoping to catch her for a conversation, but she immediately ran upstairs.

"Then why did you say nothing?" Owen asked curiously. "Matilda is a considerate woman. She would take your concerns into account."

"I do not have a right to have my concerns taking into account," Henry said flatly. "That was the reason she married me. To have her freedom."

"Freedom does not mean that you should ignore one another." Owen looked confused. "Freedom does not mean separate lives."

"Perhaps she values her privacy." Henry took another sip, starting to feel a bit tipsy.

"Privacy?" Owen stared at him closely. "What arrangement did you make, Henry?"

"What do you mean?" Henry could feel the warmth of the fire lulling him slightly, making him feel more relaxed.

"Privacy? Do you intend to maintain other liaisons?" Owen asked frankly.

Henry couldn't be surprised by the question, though it was probably the wrong time to be answering it. If he hadn't been drinking brandy

on an empty stomach then he might have rebuffed it.

"I didn't intend to." Henry sighed, "I promised I would never humiliate her, so if I did it would have to be incredibly discreet, but... I don't know if I could say the same for her."

"You cannot be serious!" Owen exclaimed. "You think the former Miss Wynter, now your wife, and the daughter of the Duke of Sinclair, is carrying on an indiscretion with someone?"

"No, of course not." Henry gulped the end of his brandy down, "but if I cannot make her happy, I don't know how I can expect her not to seek happiness with someone else. Now I must go back to my wife."

"No, Henry, you should stay. You have drunk too much," Owen protested, standing up as his friend stood, taking his glass, and watching him stroll defiantly to the door.

"I shall be perfectly fine to ride home," Henry slurred slightly, knowing that even though the world was tilting a little he would be more than capable of making it back to Glavensborne. "After all, I cannot spend my wedding night with my best man, can I?"

"It would surely be preferable to spend it with your wife," Owen said quietly, walking him outside into the warm evening.

"Indeed." Henry snorted, shivering slightly in the cold outside air, and gesturing for his horse to be brought around. "If she wanted to spend any time with me, I am sure it would be."

"Talk to her, Henry," Owen said softly. "At least explain what you feel."

"You think you know how I feel?" Henry shook his head again, watching the groom bring his horse across the gravel path.

"I think you feel more than you expected," Owen said quietly. "That in marrying her, you have uncovered something new. You would be wise to honour those feelings. You can at least try."

Henry pressed his hand into the horse's mane, sighing heavily as he put his boot into the stirrup, preparing to mount.

How can I explain that now that I am married to her, I think I want more than we agreed?

“No.” Henry shook his head at the thought, refusing to accept it. “I will never push her to more than she wants.”

With that, Henry threw himself back up onto his horse and rode off into the night. As the warm air blew into his face and the grand horse moved underneath him, he couldn't help but be shaken a little back out of his drunkenness. He felt a twinge of regret for his candour with Owen, but he felt safe in the knowledge that his best friend would never betray his confidence. He and Owen had kept one another's secrets for so long, this was simply another to add to the list. Yet as he rode on, he mulled over Owen's words. *You think she is carrying on an indiscretion with someone?* The further he rode, the more Henry considered it. When the light summer rain began to fall, he found himself wondering if the thought had any value. Matilda had been desperate for freedom, she had turned down many suitors. Could it be that she had turned them down because she had a lover? Maybe someone inappropriate, like a commoner, who she knew she could never marry. *If any lady were to shun the expectations of society and fall in love beneath her station, it would be Matilda*, Henry thought dully. He had imagined that such a thought might make him feel free. If Matilda was pursuing alternative relationships then he was free to as well, as long as he was discreet. He should be unaffected. This was exactly the kind of independence they had planned. Instead, Henry only felt uncomfortable. As he rode on and the lights of Glavensborne came into view, that feeling solidified into a darker, stronger emotion that Henry recognised with a twist of his stomach: He was jealous.

Oh God, how can I be jealous of my own wife?

Henry resolved that he would not let his emotions get the worst of him like they had this evening. He would not lose his head over Matilda. If she wanted distance, he would give it to her. He would give her whatever she wanted.

Chapter Eighteen

“Are you well, my lady?” Betty asked, looking down at Matilda as she sat in the window seat of her parlour at Glavensborne.

“No, Betty,” Matilda said simply, staring out over the gardens. “I am lonely.”

“Well, it is quite a transition, my lady,” Betty said quietly, folding away some of Matilda’s best gowns in rice paper with sprigs of lavender to preserve them. “You come from a busy, lively house. Glavensborne is...different.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Matilda grumbled, pulling her knee up to her chest and resting her cheek on it. Henry was out at Owen’s again. He had been riding there nearly every day, and when he was home he was immersed in the work of the estate in the library, consulting with the estate manager for hours on end. When they ate formally at the end of the day in the dining room, they spoke only the most basic pleasantries. Matilda would struggle to say more, surrounded by about eight household servants waiting to serve them in different ways. It was far away from the easy family dinners she was used to. She had never realised how deeply unconventional her parents’ house was. She had never thought that she would miss it so much, or she would ever feel so completely unable to start an easy conversation with Henry Linfield. Part of her longed to simply take off her evening gloves at the table, slap them down, and demand he share his thoughts, but she held back. They had promised freedom to one another, separate lives. It wouldn’t be fair to demand otherwise, even if it made her miserable.

“Glavensborne is very beautiful but it is comparatively quiet,” Betty continued, lifting the gowns into trunks. They were her summer gowns, and she was putting them away to prepare for the autumn season.

“That’s true,” Matilda sighed, then gestured to the other trunk. “I think the russet gown, the olive, the emerald and the navy will be suitable for this change in weather.”

“Yes, my lady.” Betty nodded, beginning to pull out the autumnal gowns. “At least, Glavensborne is only quiet for now.”

Matilda knew what Betty meant. It was what many would assume of their new marriage, they would expect that Matilda and Henry were a love match hastening down the altar to allow them quick intimacies, and would be watching carefully for a sign of children. Today, the thought of being so closely observed by society was aggravating to Matilda.

“Well, it will likely be quiet for many years more,” Matilda huffed, resting her chin on her knee.

“Come, my lady, do not say so,” Betty chided softly, unfolding a beautiful ruby gown with a gold floral pattern.

“I shall wear that one today,” Matilda said, reaching out to touch the velvet red trim on the cap sleeves and the light, voile red sleeves that ran underneath it. It was a gorgeous gown. She had worn it last winter and received many compliments. She wondered if Henry would even notice.

“It is beautiful.” Betty laid it out on the bed, then gestured for Matilda to stand so she could unbutton her nightdress. “Perhaps my lord shall like this gown on you, my lady. He seemed very fond of your wedding dress on the day.”

“Oh, did he say so?” Matilda asked cynically, lifting her arms over her head so that Betty could remove her nightdress and then stepped onto the small square of towel prepared for her morning wash.

“Of course not, my lady, but I saw his face.” Betty smiled, bringing the bowl of warm water to the stand and rubbing lavender soap into a washcloth. “He looked quite enchanted.”

“Well, looking will not populate Glavensborne,” Matilda snorted, “not if my lord continues to shun my bed chamber.”

Betty gently washed under Matilda’s arms, the warm water dripping

down her shift and onto her breasts. Her nakedness annoyed her. Here she was, her body young and nubile and ready to be claimed but still innocent. She had been so nervous about the idea of sharing Henry's bed, but she had never expected him to simply avoid it entirely. *I'm a married virgin; I feel as if I belong nowhere.* Matilda sighed heavily, reaching up to lift her dark curls so Betty could sluice the water across her back and neck. Matilda felt no qualms in speaking so candidly with Betty. She was all she had here; if her mother were there Matilda might confide in her, but in truth, she might have struggled to be honest with her dear Mama. Betty at least knew the truth of the whole situation and didn't judge her for it. Though the new servants were kind and respectful, there was no one else in the house she trusted aside from Henry, and she did not feel she could truly trust Henry, not with the dark misery inside her heart. She had always thought herself attractive, though she was not vain she had always been aware of her beauty. She had thought, at least, Henry might have wanted to kiss her as he had done the day her father had accepted his suit. Was he repulsed by her? Did he find the idea of lying with her, of consummating their marriage abhorrent, as he might when considering a friend who he thought of like a sister? How foolish had she been to think that he could have moved past it?

"Oh Betty, what have I done?" Matilda intoned quietly, feeling her eyes prick with tears as Betty washed her so gently. "I always imagined and dreamed of this moment, of being his wife, and now... now it is nothing like I expected it to be. Were my expectations too high?"

"Give it time, my lady," Betty said gently, patting her damp body with a towel and gently applying a rose and jasmine scented oil to her collarbones. "One cannot expect a man to fall in love in a week, not when you have been in love for years. Give it time."

"How much time?" Matilda replied, bleakly.

"I do not know, my lady," Betty answered, reaching for Matilda's stays, and tying them tightly. Matilda took a sharp breath at the pull of the cotton ribbons. "As long as it takes, I suppose."

"I can't live like that." Matilda sighed, pressing a hand to her tightened bosom, the firm swell of her creamy breasts. *Still untouched, still unwanted. Even as his wife, he does not see me as anything more than a friend.* "I can't survive on the possibility of hope. There is nothing to

ensure that he shall ever love me back.”

“There is also nothing to say that he shall not,” Betty retorted. “He cares for you, my lady. I have seen it with my own eyes.”

“Before the wedding, maybe,” Matilda conceded, remembering their playful flirtations. “But since then? There has been nothing. He hasn’t touched me, hasn’t come near me, hasn’t even...”

Consummated our marriage, Matilda added inside her head, too embarrassed to say the words to Betty, despite their closeness. She felt her throat close up with despair. She had what she had always wanted, she had Henry for her husband, yet she had never felt further away from him.

“My lady?” Betty asked in concern, touching her shoulder gently. Matilda coughed and shook her head, a wry smile flickering on her lips.

“I am no more married than you are, dear Betty,” Matilda said, “not in the ways that matter.”

“That is not true, my lady.” Betty squeezed her hands earnestly. “Marriage is not only one act or moment, but many woven together. You shall be with my lord all your life. This is only the beginning. You must have faith.”

Matilda took a deep breath. She didn’t know if she did have faith. Before their marriage, she had held hopes that Henry might feel something for her. Even at the church, as her heart squeezed under the pressure of his tender kiss and words, she had held hope for it. But then, she had noticed the façade he was wearing, the way he was playing the part of a husband, how easy it was for him. Lulu’s cruel reminders of his past intimacies had burrowed under her skin and into her heart and she could not ignore them. For the entire carriage ride, she had worried over all the times that Henry must have taken women to bed, that he must have kissed them with abandon and taken his pleasure with them. She had been equal parts terrified that he would kiss her and then she would not be able to control her feelings for him, and equal parts terrified that he wouldn’t, and it would mean she did not meet his expectations. Then he had never come to her bed. Night after night she had waited. He never came. Slowly, her hopefulness had waned to cynicism and then to cold disassociation.

He had fulfilled his obligation. She had fulfilled hers. That was all it was.

“Maybe...maybe it would be better if I had never married him,” Matilda whispered, putting up her arms so Betty could pull her gown on. “Maybe it was better when I loved him from afar and did not need to face his...indifference.”

“Oh, my lady, you must not think like this.” Betty did up her buttons and tied half of her hair up with a red ribbon, turning her towards the mirror to peruse her reflection. “Look at yourself, my lady. There is not a gentleman alive who would not desire you. Give him time to get used to you. He will come to you, I am sure.”

Matilda stared at herself in the mirror. The red gown with the gold print was a beautiful cut for her body, even she could see it. The neckline was not squared but a gentle plunge highlighted by the cherry red velvet ribbon on the neck and under the bust. The red net lace sleeves were sleek and suggestive, as well as being elegant and suitable for the weather. The colouring made her lips seem redder, her curling hair darker and her skin paler. She was alluring, she knew it, but none of it mattered to her if Henry could not see it.

“I suppose if any gown might make it possible, it is this one.” Matilda sighed, stroking her hand down the front of it. “Thank you, Betty.”

“You are welcome, my lady,” Betty said, starting to tidy up as Matilda sat back down at her window seat, looking out over the gardens. Surprisingly, she saw Henry’s tall hat disappearing inside the house below and his horse being walked back to the stables. *He must be home*, she thought, assuming he would disappear back into the library. Then she heard footsteps along the landing, and thought he must be going to his own chambers to change. Then, a surprising knock on the door. Betty answered it, bowing instinctively.

“Good morning, my lord.”

Matilda turned and stared at Henry in the doorway to her chamber, her eyes flickering to Betty, unspoken words passing between them: *It is a very good dress.*

“How can we help you, my lord?” Matilda asked politely, too surprised to rise up and greet him properly.

“Well, uh ...”

To Matilda’s complete shock, Henry looked flustered. He stared down at his boots and his cheeks began to flush. Finally, he looked back up, eyes assured.

“I hoped you might join me for a picnic, my lady?”



Henry watched his wife carefully as they walked down through the gardens, a picnic basket under his arm and a warm blanket clutched to her chest, and Owen’s words rolling around and around in his head. Owen had slightly lost his temper that morning when Henry had arrived for what had become his daily ‘consultation’ about the investigation which had essentially become Henry venting his dissatisfaction with his marriage. Henry had at first been affronted by Owen’s suggestion, but on the ride back to Glavensborne, he had weighed up the options. He could continue to distance himself from Matilda, to worry that her lonely rides were travels to secret liaisons and torture himself with jealousy, or he could try and re-engage with her.

You can’t continue to ignore her and wallow in your misery, Owen had said, flatly. If you want to spend more time with her, be a man and spend more time with her!

Matilda had seemed stunned to receive an invitation, but not unhappy with it. As they walked along together he thought he could determine a slight spring in her step, similar to the normal, confident manner she usually strolled along in. Henry couldn’t deny that she looked delightful. The red gown was stunning, the neckline of it flattering on her in a way that he hadn’t seen before, and her hair which was usually contained up in elegant hair arrangements was more free-form, part of it loose and trailing down her back. Though it would not be suitable for company he liked it a lot. He wished he could run his fingers through it. *Be a man.*

“You look beautiful today,” he said quietly, as he held open the small gate at the bottom of the gardens that led to the orchard.

“Thank you.” Matilda looked up at him in surprise. She rubbed her hand down the front of her dress. “It is one of my favourites.”

"I can see why." Henry reached out and touched the transparent, red net lace sleeves without thinking about it. "This is an interesting alternative to gloves."

"Yes, isn't it?" Matilda looked down at them, amused, with some of her former levity. "When I wore it at winter balls last year, I was the fascination of the Ton! I tell you, I have never seen gentleman more intrigued by my arms even when they were bare!"

"I can see why that was true!" Henry laughed, looking down at her delicate wrists in admiration. "There is something about obscuring something that makes it more appealing."

"Well, I missed a trick there. Perhaps I should have covered my face when I came out to society, then I would have princes falling at my feet," Matilda joked, rolling her eyes drolly. Henry couldn't help but grin to see it. *I've missed this.*

"I do not think you struggled, Tills," he laughed. "How many proposals did you decline before mine succeeded?"

"I lost count." Matilda waved her hand glibly, looking around the orchard. "This is beautiful! Where shall we sit?"

"I thought you might like to climb a tree, make a nest..." Henry joked, overjoyed when he received a huff and light push in the shoulder from his friend. *His friend.* That was what he had been missing this week. The company of the friend he had been so grateful to have back in his life.

"If you're not careful, I will make you build me a treehouse and then I will have reason to climb a tree," Matilda taunted, wiggling her eyebrows, and then shaking out the blanket to lay it down at the foot of a large apple tree.

"That could be fun," Henry said thoughtfully, throwing himself down on the blanket and crossing his boots as he leaned back on his elbows. "Maybe not here, though, maybe further into the woodland."

"I thought only children had treehouses," Matilda teased, flopping down beside him, and mimicking his posture. He noticed how the position made the swell of her creamy breasts more prominent. He tried not to stare.

“Children and faeries.” Henry raised his eyebrows suggestively. “Are you not a faery? I thought you were.”

“How dare you?” Matilda nudged him in mock annoyance. “What would give you that idea?”

“Well, there’s the always living in trees, always sneaking into the woods...” Henry pretended to muse, grinning at her, and feeling cheeky.

“Oh really?” Matilda looked at him with a deadpan face as she unpacked the basket, pulling out a bowl of freshly picked blackberries that Mrs York had put in for them. “Well, wouldn’t that make you a faery too?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Henry said, picking up a blackberry and popping it into his mouth. “I don’t have the flowing faery hair, the skin as pale as snow, the eyes like pieces of gemstones —”

“Enough!” He was surprised to find that Matilda’s hand was pressed against his mouth, her eyes filled with sparkling wit. “We’re already married, Henry, there’s no need to flirt so shamelessly.”

Henry held back his instinct to kiss her palm against his lips. Her eyes met his and there was a moment of tension. Henry fought against the urge to grab her waist and pull her towards him. Instead, he flicked his tongue against her palm. He saw the shock in her eyes and then she whipped her hand away.

“Henry! You’re disgusting!” She shrieked as he rolled around on the blanket in laughter, raining ineffectual blows down upon his head and back. “I’ll get you for that!”

“Oh lord, Tills, you’re going to have to do better than that!” Henry laughed, grabbing her wrists and smiling.

“Oh, I can do better.” Matilda’s eyes were flickering with an intense determination, and then, suddenly Matilda’s fingers were reaching the sensitive places on his stomach and sides so he bent over, giggling helplessly.

“Don’t!” Henry squawked as Matilda laughed above him. “I’m ticklish!”

"I remember." Matilda giggled evilly. "The time by the river, remember? Say the word!"

"Never!" Henry growled, pulling Matilda tightly against him as they rolled in the grass, but her quick fingers always found a way.

"Say it!" Matilda squeaked.

"Fine! Fine! Surrender!" Henry shouted. "Surrender!"

"I knew it!" Matilda crowed, flopping against him with a sigh. "You always surrender in the end."

"Only because you're so vicious," Henry grumbled, tucking his arm around Matilda's shoulder and, without thinking, kissing the top of her head. He froze for a moment, half expecting her to pull away but then she did something utterly unexpected. She sighed a little and nestled closer. For a moment, they were both still, the beautiful birds singing softly above them and the trees rustling with gentle breezes. For a moment, Henry felt perfectly at peace. Then he felt Matilda shifting beside him.

"Are you alright?" he murmured, looking down on her.

"Yes, I'm lying on an apple." Matilda leaned up, looking down on him. Henry almost couldn't breathe as he looked at her. Her dark curls were rumpled from the tussle, her gown pulled slightly lower and revealing the flushed skin of her bosom. She looked utterly delectable.

"You've got some blackberry juice on your chin." Matilda smiled fondly, reaching down to rub at his face. Henry smiled back, reaching for the plump fruit in the bowl behind them.

"You should try one, their delicious," he said, unthinkingly lifting a berry to her lips. Her eyes darted from his fingers to his face and Henry wondered if he was going too far, if he was pushing the boundaries of their friendship to the limit. *She's my wife now, there are no limits.* The thought caused a riot of desire inside, but he stayed perfectly still, waiting to see how Matilda reacted.

"Thank you," Matilda whispered. Then, rather than taking the berry from his fingers, she bent her mouth and took the fruit and his fingers onto her tongue. Henry gasped, feeling the outrageous eroticism of the

moment as his dearest friend licked the berry off his finger and withdrew her lips.

“Matilda,” he whispered, his hand reaching up to the back of her neck, tangling in her curls as he pulled her slowly closer.

“Yes?” she breathed, her lips darkened by purple berry juice.

“Stop me if this isn’t what you want,” Henry said, pulling her body down to press against him, hearing her breath hitch in that incredibly enticing way that drove him wild. *Don’t stop me, please Matilda, don’t stop me.*

“Henry...” Matilda breathed, her black curls surrounding him like a dark curtain, shutting out the light so all he could feel was her warm breath. He braced himself for her words of denial, but they never came, instead. He felt her lips pressed against his. She didn’t stop him.

Chapter Nineteen

Henry was kissing her. She was kissing Henry. She was on top of Henry, pressing herself against him with reckless abandon. She felt like she was on fire, that her bones were burning with need, even though she didn't quite understand what that need was. Only that she had to keep kissing him, or she would lose her mind entirely. *In the middle of the orchard.* They were outside, on the grass, where anyone might walk by.

What are you doing?

The rational part of her brain screamed, and she broke the kiss.

"Tills?" Henry asked beneath her, his chest heaving. He was so close, they were pressed so tightly, she could feel his thumping heartbeat. She stared down at the man, *her husband*, lying beneath her.

"Oh Lord," Matilda breathed, pulling away from Henry suddenly. "We shouldn't be doing this — Oh!"

She gasped as she noticed the way her gown had pulled down and instinctively tugged it back up, unable to stop herself noticing the way his eyes widened as she jiggled herself slightly to rearrange.

"I'm sorry," Henry immediately said, breathing heavily. "Do you wish to stop?"

"No, but anyone could see!" Matilda hissed, trying not to be overtaken by the blood that was rushing to his lips, making them so plump and enticing to her.

"No one can see us, Tills, it's very sheltered here," Henry reassured her, his hand stroking her neck. "But if you want to stop...we can."

He said the words breathlessly, his jaw tightening as he spoke. She could almost believe the words caused him pain. Matilda was astounded by the cloudy lust she saw in his eyes, by the redness of his cheeks. All of the pieces fit together in a strange but illuminating picture, the knowledge blasting through her mind like a gunshot. He was aroused. He was aroused because of *her*!

“Oh Lord!” she immediately sat up, straddling him, covering her mouth in surprise. It couldn’t be! After everything she had desired, everything she had written in her diary about her childhood wishes, could it be true?

“You’re...attracted to me? Truly?”

“I would have thought that much obvious.” Henry chuckled lightly, his hands resting lightly on her waist, making her skin prickle. “Especially from your current seat.”

“My current seat?” Matilda asked quizzically, and Henry deliberately looked down to his lap. Matilda flushed deeply, looking down to notice the taut flesh evident at the front of his trousers, everything her mother had ever taught her about male anatomy running through her mind with embarrassing lividity.

“Oh God!” she exclaimed, scrambling to pull herself off him yet Henry’s hands stayed on her hips as she giggled. “I’m sorry!”

“Calm down, Tilly!” Henry laughed. Held in place by firm hands she was unable to move far away from him and instead they ended up lying side by side on the picnic blanket, gazing at one another expectantly.

“I’m embarrassed,” Matilda mumbled, hiding her face in her hands.

“Why? I don’t mind.” Henry’s fingers pulled hers away from her cheeks. Amazingly, he smiled at her. He set his hand back down at her waist. His hand began trailing softly up and down her side, making her whole body shiver. “Do you?”

Matilda swallowed hard, deliberately refusing to look down at his prominent arousal. It wasn’t disconcerting at all, she found, rather... thrilling. *He is attracted to me, he must be, his body betrays his true feelings.*

“No, I don’t mind,” Matilda whispered, her voice faltering. “I am only...astonished that you...”

“Could be attracted to you?” Henry’s eyebrows raised into his hairline as his hand involuntarily clenched on the soft flesh of her side, making her breath catch in her throat.

“Yes,” Matilda confessed, her whisper almost soundless but their faces were so close, her breath warming his nose and lips, he couldn’t mishear it.

“You must be aware of how beautiful you are.” Henry’s voice a deep rumble as his hand moved higher, tracing the side of her breast in a way that made her dizzy. His head tipped closer, and Matilda felt her eyes drift closed as his voice growled against her cheek. “How alluring you appear to others.”

“You’ve surely seen many beautiful women,” Matilda protested, unexpectedly stroking his golden curls as his lips pressed featherlight kisses along her jaw.

“Yes, many,” Henry joked, and Matilda found herself tapping the back of his head reproachfully at the same time as pulling him closer. “But you must see how unique you are.”

“Yes, but my uniqueness has hardly ever been a selling point,” Matilda joked back, thinking of her comparatively pale alabaster complexion, her raven dark, almost black hair. She remembered how pretty and fresh Althea had looked on their wedding day, filled with country ripe classic good looks.

“Look at me, Tills.”

She obeyed reluctantly. His eyes caught hers for a moment, lifting his face from her neck so their eyes were level.

“What was it that Medea called you at our wedding breakfast? An Iris?” Henry teased lightly.

“Lord, you heard that?” Matilda groaned, feeling her pale skin flushing. He was still unbearably close, his thumb still running up and down the side seam of her gown. Her heart was racing. She wanted him closer but also was afraid of what would come next.

“Oh yes, I did.” Henry grinned in that playful way that always made her stomach turn somersaults. “My sister was right, of course. You are just like that. Did you know that Iris is the name of the Greek goddess of the rainbow?”

“No,” Matilda breathed, trying to control the way her fingers were trembling in his hair.

“I saw a representation of her likeness painted when I was in Greece.” Henry smiled, his hand stroking a piece of her hair. “She was as pale as you are, like marble, her hair as dark as yours. Always wearing blue, too, as you are fond of.”

“It matches my eyes,” Matilda said breathlessly, watching the way Henry’s eager eyes took in her whole face, almost greedily. It made her chest tight with anticipation.

“I know it does,” Henry chuckled, “but with eyes like those, and all the looks of a goddess, it is a wonder to me that you could ever imagine there is a man alive on earth who would not be enchanted by you.”

“Henry.” Matilda’s voice was somewhere between warning and begging and Henry responded instantly, capturing her mouth with his own, the taste of blackberries still lingering on his tongue. She couldn’t help the small moan that escaped her as his tongue danced across her lip, teasing her to open her mouth further, to allow him to delve inside. She had never imagined it could be like this that it was possible for there to be a more intimate kiss available to her but here it was. Tasting Henry, the feeling of his hot, inquiring tongue plundering her mouth was more than she could bear. She could feel his hand moving to cup her breast, feel her nipple hardening inside her stays at the insistent brush of his thumb. She pulled her lips away from his in a gasp, feeling him smile in response. Matilda felt a slight flame of embarrassment; he knew that he was arousing her, knew he could make her pant and gasp like a maiden in a novel, but she wanted to do that for him also. Stirred by her own deep competitive nature, her childhood instinct to match Henry at every turn was now applied to this. Just as she’d been the first try and bowl over arm, the first to follow him over the hedge when jumping horses, she found herself pushing back. She arched her back, pressing her breasts firmly against his chest, and brought her hand up to tangle in his gorgeous curls. She followed her desires and began to kiss his neck, feeling the

jump of his heartbeat at the pulse point and the recently shaved skin of his jaw rough under her roving tongue. It had the desired effect.

“God, Tills!” Henry gasped, tipping his head back eagerly to allow her more space to kiss. Matilda felt an urgent twinge deep in her belly at the use of that familiar nickname and she kissed him harder, unable to stop herself from biting slightly, her impulse to devour him just as he had devoured her overwhelming. “Ouch!”

“Oh, forgive me!” Matilda gasped, pulling away and pressing her fingers against the round patch of red skin she had inflicted. “Did I hurt you?”

“I didn’t mind.” Henry smiled, gently taking her fingertips, and pressing the gentlest of kisses against the soft pads. Matilda felt a tremor run from his lips all the way through her arm and down to the deepest part of her. A warm, tightening sensation was building in her lower abdomen, the like she had never felt in a man’s presence. She closed her eyes, breathing the longest, shallowest of breaths. When she opened her eyes, Henry was watching her carefully.

“I am sorry,” she stuttered, trying to explain herself. “This is the first time I have...that I have felt like...”

She couldn’t complete her sentence. *This is the first time I have felt like it could all be real. That we could love one another, truly, with our entire beings. That you could feel for me what I feel for you.* She couldn’t make the words form on her lips, so she bit down instead, the sharp pain released some of her tension. Henry saw it and frowned. He lifted his hand to cup her chin, brushing the stray dark curls away.

“Are you afraid of me, Tills?” Henry asked, his green eyes almost glowing in the dappled midday sun.

“No,” she breathed, lifting her own hand to meet his, feeling their fingers instantly curl around one another. “Of course not.”

“Then don’t be scared of what you feel.” He leaned closer, pressing his lips against hers with a delicate but reassuring kiss. When he spoke, his words fell against her hot lips. “Just tell me what you desire.”

Matilda’s head swum at the thought. She instantly imagined a million scenarios, kisses in locations around world, lying in bed together,

nuzzling close and tender, but there was nothing she could put into immediate thought. She only knew the essentials of what took place between a man and woman on their wedding night. Her mother had explained what she would need to know to get with child, but not what sort of things a lady could desire of a man. All she could do was trust her instincts and hope Henry would not laugh at her innocence.

"I want you to touch me," Matilda said, her voice faltering. She expected Henry to smirk at her lack of specific knowledge, but instead his green eyes widened, the dark pupils inflating with lust.

"Where?" Henry swallowed. She watched the bobbing of his Adams apple and marvelled at the deep flush beginning to spread up from under the edge of his stock. Since being honest had received such a positive response, she decided to continue on.

"I don't know," she whispered, gently moving their joined hands back down to the front of her gown, allowing his warm, slightly calloused fingertips to brush against the exposed slope of her cleavage. She saw him tremble and swallow again. It pushed her on, made her bolder than she had ever imagined she could be. "Anywhere that makes me feel like this does."

She eased the neckline of her gown even lower. Lying on her side as she was there was a little gaping in her stays and her breast slipped out slightly, her warm, naked nipple pressing into Henry's palm. She gasped, cheeks red at her own astonishing hubris, and heard Henry groan. Then he did something she could never have imagined. He dipped his head down and took her nipple into his mouth, teasing it with his hot tongue.

"Henry!" she gasped, rolling onto her back and allowing him to follow on top of her.

"Should I stop?" Henry gasped, his words hot against her breast and she found herself echoing his movements. As his hand reached down to fumble blindly at the edge of her gown, she lifted her knee so he could clamp his fingers underneath. Deft fingers traced the edge of her stockings and hooked her knee up around his hips, so she instinctively wrapped her leg around him, pulling him closer. He pushed nudged his knee in between her legs, she spread them easily, allowing him to press between her. She wasn't prepared for the hard, long flesh of his groin pressing into hers but still she bucked upwards, her hips rising

to meet his. He groaned, rubbing his face against her bare chest, undone.

"I swear, Matilda," he growled, "if you want me to stop, you need to tell me, right now."

"No." She grabbed his head roughly, lifting his flushed face up to look at her. "No, don't stop. Do more."

His eyes lit up with savage want and his lips crashed against hers, ungainly and hard, a moment that tasted, to Matilda's mind, exactly how she had imagined desire might taste.

"There is so much more," Henry panted against her lips, his hard flesh pressed against the softest part of her so that Matilda groaned, her neck stretched taut as she arched towards him. "So much more I am eager to show you, so much more pleasure to be enjoyed."

"Then show me!" Matilda gasped impatiently, feeling Henry grin against her as his hand once again fumbled at the edge of her gown, pulling it up and slipping his hand underneath, fleetingly travelling over the warm, never-touched skin of her thigh. He was watching her avidly, his lips slightly open, taking in her half-bared breasts, her tangled hair, her exposed blue stockings. Under his perusal, Matilda felt unbearably compromised and decided to even the score.

"I want to see you," Matilda demanded, tugging his stock loose and unbuttoning his waist coat, pushing it off his shoulders. "It's only fair."

"I can't argue with that." Henry chuckled, happily shrugging away his waistcoat and throwing his stock aside. He quickly tugged his arms out of his suspenders and Matilda took the initiative, tugging his shirt out of his trousers and letting her hands glide up over his stomach. Her hands trembled slightly as she felt curls of soft hair and ridged muscles. Henry groaned but was giving as good as he got. His lips fell upon hers once more, one hand creeping up under her shift as his other grasped her left breast, softly squeezing her in a way that made her let out a thoroughly undignified squeak of desire. She flushed again, her eyes tightly closed in embarrassment.

"Is that a good noise?" Henry laughed gently against her lips. Matilda nipped his bottom lip in rebuke and, reaching up to tug the open

neckline of his shirt down, set her teeth and lips firmly against his golden collarbone, kissing and sucking in a way that produced a string of barely comprehensible curses. Matilda smirked against the damp skin.

“Were those good noises?” she murmured cheekily.

“Don’t tease me, Tills,” Henry warned, breathing heavily. “You have no idea what I have in store.”

“I told you.” Matilda grabbed his neck and pulled him down for a savage kiss, feeling his breath catch in his chest. “Show me.”

“How could I deny my wife?” His words caused her heart to flutter. For a moment she had forgotten they were wed, content in the feeling that they were just Henry and Matilda, just being themselves in a way that felt natural to them. She was reminded that they were bound, bound already in a way that was holy. Anything more that came next was only a progression of that. Before she could put words to what she was feeling, Henry’s fingers had reached their final destination. She gasped.

“If this is too much you have to tell me,” Henry whispered, lowering himself down next to her, one leg draped over her rucked-up skirts as his lips pressed fervently against her neck. His fingers kept moving, brushing against the hair of her most intimate parts.

“It’s not too much,” Matilda gasped, even though she felt like her heart might thunder out of her chest in excitement. “Keep going.”

“You’ll have to tell me what to do.” Henry nuzzled into the soft skin under her ears, sending shivers down the back of her legs.

“Don’t you know?” Matilda croaked. Henry’s fingers were beginning to stroke more insistently, nearly robbing her of her ability to speak.

“I want to know what feels good for you.” Henry licked her bare collarbone and then down to her nipple, his tongue flickering to make it stand abrupt and swollen. “When you are alone, when you give yourself pleasure, when you give yourself release late at night in bed...what do you do?”

Matilda was too aroused to possibly process the intimacy of this

question. Her fingers were clenching into the dirt underneath her and she knew that whatever Henry did, whatever magic his fingers performed, she was only moments away from the release he was enquiring about.

“Lower,” she choked out, feeling his finger follow her command and she arched against him as he met the hot, pulsing point of her desire. “Harder.”

“Good God, Tills,” Henry groaned against her breast. “When you talk like that...”

Matilda knew exactly what he meant. As he spoke her familiar childhood nickname again, as it rumbled against the sensitive skin of her nipple and through her breastbone to her heart, she felt her release flowing through her. Her hips bucked up against him and she buried her face in his neck with a gasp, biting her lip hard to keep from crying out what she so desperately felt, what she wished she could say.

I love you, Henry. I love you with all my heart.

He was speaking her name over and over, his trembling hands gripping her hips as she pushed her body against his. Despite still feeling the golden edges of her pleasure blot out her vision, she wanted more. She reached down to the buttons of his trousers but to her surprise, Henry pulled back, breathing heavily.

“What is it?” Matilda gasped, her nose brushing against his. “Do you not want to?”

“Oh, I do,” Henry half gasped and half laughed, his eyes closed tight as he rested his forehead against hers. She could feel the slight dampness of sweat covering his brow. “I dearly want to, but I would prefer our first time proceeding with such an endeavour was not...on the ground.”

Matilda sighed deeply, pulling her hand away from his trousers. She swallowed down her disappointment and tried to fight back the needy, almost aching want between her legs to be joined with him.

“So should I,” Matilda confessed, cradling his face with her hands and kissing the corner of his mouth. Despite the desire running rampant

through her body at the moment, the sensible part of Matilda's mind, the part that sounded uncomfortably like her mother, knew that the claiming of her maidenhead would be a business better negotiated on a feather mattress. She and Henry lay together, their foreheads touching, waiting for their breathing to come back under control. Matilda also knew, intuitively, that they were also waiting for Henry's own arousal to recede. She was grateful for the moments to centre her own mind, to wait for the gentle spasming taking place between her legs to disappear. Finally, she shivered, the cold autumn breeze blowing through the orchard finally catching up with her.

"You are cold," Henry whispered. "We should dress and go inside."

"Agreed," Matilda said, though she was also secretly loathed to leave this secret, intimate moment they had created. It seemed like nothing could touch them here. As she pulled her gown back up, shuffled her skirts and re-set her hair, she couldn't deny the edge of panic creeping back into her mind. What if everything changed when they left the orchard? What if they both went back to the awkwardness and discomfort they had been enduring since their wedding day? Henry, who didn't take his eyes off her, was fumbling as he re-tied his stock. Matilda noticed and smiled. It was an endearing sign of his affection.

"Come here." Matilda took pity on him and reached up on her tip toes to help him. "You should focus on what's in front of you, Henry."

"I am." Henry grinned. "She has the most beautiful eyes."

"Honestly." She rolled her eyes as she finished tying it, turning away from him only for her hand to be grabbed. Henry pulled her back and cupped her cheek, kissing her so deeply and thoroughly that all of her worries floated away.

"Let's go inside, Lady Linfield," Henry breathed, kissing her forehead.

Matilda smiled to herself. No matter what happened, they wouldn't be going back to how things had been before. She was sure that by the time the sun rose tomorrow morning, she would Lady Linfield in vow, word and deed.

"Yes, let's." She said, smiling up at her husband.

Chapter Twenty

Henry and Matilda walked back to the house hand in hand.

Henry couldn't stop himself from staring at her as they did, noticing the still prominent flush of the skin behind her ears, the way her hair was still mussed up from their tussle in the orchard. Matilda caught his eye, smirking.

"Something bothering you, Henry?"

He shook his head, smiling ruefully. She knew exactly what was bothering him. The memories of their time lying under the apple trees were still warm and throbbing between them. He rubbed his hand through his hair in frustration, trying to minimise his still lingering arousal, but caught the residual scent of her most intimate parts on his fingers. He felt a stab of desire in his abdomen, so strong that he had to stifle back a groan. He squeezed her hand, sighing heavily.

"Nothing a night with my wife can't cure," he said gently, raising their joined hands up to his lips to kiss her knuckles. Matilda's eyes widened with surprise and expectation.

"Well then, shall we adjourn to our quarters?" she whispered, her blue eyes glittering in the low afternoon light. Henry felt his body respond with anticipation.

"That sounds perfect," he answered honestly. He imagined a repeat of their tryst under the trees, this time with the completion he had been dreaming of since he had first dreamt of her. Yet as they approached the house they saw a familiar figure silhouetted against the low afternoon sun.

"Why is Lord Barton here?" Matilda frowned. "Did you not see him just this morning?"

"I did, I don't know why he's here," Henry answered. Owen was the one who sent him home to his wife, basically commanded him to spend more time with her, and yet here he was, waiting on the doorstep. He raised his hand in greeting as they came closer. Owen had a serious look on his face, but his expression broke into a smile when he saw that they were holding hands.

"Owen, is everything well?" Henry called.

"Oh yes, all fine, I just have some business for us to manage," Owen reassured them, bowing gently to Matilda. "How are you, Lady Linfield?"

"Call me Matilda, Lord Barton." Matilda smiled, nodding to his friend with a sweet expression. Henry's heart squeezed with happiness to see his wife getting along so well with his best friend.

"Then I must insist you call me Owen." Owen grinned. "If you don't mind, could I borrow your husband for a small errand in the county?"

"Of course." Matilda smiled and looked at Henry. He could tell there was a hint of disappointment in her eyes. He realised with delight that she had been looking forward to carrying on their encounter in the bedroom as well.

"Don't worry." He brushed her cheek tenderly and smiled. "I shall not be long."

"I shall wait," Matilda whispered quietly, and then turned to Owen with a friendly smile. "Take care of my husband, Owen."

"Of course, Matilda, we shall ride swiftly, I promise it." Owen nodded and the two men watched Matilda walk away, her red dress stunning in the low light.

"Things seem better?" Owen asked quietly.

"They do, don't they?" Henry mused, waiting until his wife had stepped inside and out of sight to turn to his friend. "What do you need, Owen?"

"Well, I know I was the one who encouraged you to drop the

investigation now you are married, but it seems like we might actually have a lead,” Owen said, looking slightly shamefaced as he spoke. “A local inn keeper claims to have seen her.”

“Local to here?” Henry asked, knowing what the answer would be.

“No, local to the church your banns were read in,” Owen admitted. “It will be a long ride out, but the innkeeper’s letter arrived only today. He claims to have a clue, some kind of trinket. I don’t know how long he will hold onto it.”

“So, we should go now if we hope to understand the full picture.” Henry sighed heavily, running his fingers through his blonde curls and staring at the doorway that Matilda had just disappeared through. She was waiting for him. He could just tell Owen not to worry about it, to leave the mystery of the strange woman in the past, but something inside him wasn’t capable of doing that. No matter how much marrying Matilda had changed his feelings, it hadn’t changed how much he worried about his reputation, and the reputation of his family. It was a reputation that now included Matilda. He would do anything to protect her now.

“Let’s go then,” Henry said, turning away from the house. He hoped that Matilda might forgive him for being a little late.

It was unfortunately not a quick or easy ride back to the small inn on the edge of the Linfield and Sinclair estates. As they rode back further north towards the city rainclouds broke and Henry found himself fervently wishing he had not left the clement weather around his house. By the time they dismounted at the inn, Henry was damp and grumpy and sore, longing for his wife.

“Let’s do this quickly,” Henry grumbled.

“Eager to get back to Matilda?” Owen grinned, tipping raindrops off his hat.

Henry rolled his eyes, not wanting to be teased but also not able deny the truth.

“Very,” he said curtly. Owen raised his eyebrows and nodded approvingly.

"I am glad you two both seem to be on the same page once more," he said, then gestured to the inn. "It is not necessary for us to do this, as I have previously said. It might be knowledge you do not want, after all."

"No, we are here now." Henry's boots squelched in the mud as he walked towards the door. "Besides, if there is a threat against my family I have even more reason to act to protect it now Matilda and I are on the same page."

"Very well." Owen wrenched open the heavy inn door with a squeak. "Let us go and see what Innkeeper Barrow has to say."

Barrow, it turned out, was an affable man who was very fond of the Sinclair family, particularly the Duke and his shooting parties that often-provided good trade every season. He eagerly invited them to sit at a small, quiet table at the back of the bar.

"When I heard rumour going round his grace was on the lookout for a lady rider, someone behaving suspicious, the memory popped into my mind," Barrow said, wiping glasses with a rough cloth. "It were a few weeks ago, terrible weather like today. It was a Sunday."

"It was the date of the service, Linfield," Owen added quietly, "I have already verified it."

Henry nodded at him and then gestured for Barrow to continue.

"Well, like I say, it was terrible weather and not much in the way of customers, then a rider came in, working their horse like a gale." Barrow shook his head at the memory. "I would have thought it were a gentleman, she handled the horse so well, but then I saw the cape and all."

"You did not see her face?" Henry said, disappointed.

"No my lord." Barrow shook his head regretfully. "Only the back of her."

"Any identifying features?" Henry pressed.

"No, my lord." Barrow frowned intently, as if focusing on the memory.

“Her hair looked dark, long, but it was raining, you see.”

“So, she could have had light hair made dark by the rain,” Owen commented. “Not much to go on.”

“No, my lord,” Barrow admitted. “Besides, she threw her hood up and galloped away when she heard my voice.”

“Anything about her steed?” Henry asked, floundering for information.

“Can’t say I’m one for horses, my lord, not for breeds and such.” Barrow frowned again. “It were big and brown, a stallion I think.”

Henry sighed, irritably. The woman described definitely sounded like the woman from the church and Henry felt a curl of frustration. How irritating to be so close to answers and yet foiled at the last moment! Owen was watching him carefully and nudged him, smiling slightly.

“Don’t despair, Linfield. That’s not the end of Mr Barrow’s story.”

“Ah, yes!” Barrow’s eyes lightened, looking at them both with a pleased expression. “I followed out, you see, to call her back, for she looked mighty wet and I were worried about a lady riding in such weather, but she took off out of here like a bullet from a gun! Then I found this on the ground by the trough her horse had been watered at.”

He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a piece of jewellery, setting it on the rough wooden table and pushing it towards them.

“As you can see, it is far too fine to belong to any of my family or regular customers,” Barrow said. “So, I kept it back, thinking the lady might return for a such a precious thing. No one came. Then the rumours started, looking for clues, and I thought of it. Sent word to his grace’s butler, Mr Holton ...”

“And Mr Holton promptly sent word to me,” Owen finished.

Henry nodded, lifting the stunning necklace up to his eyes. It was one of the finest chains he had seen, a beautiful, delicate hammered silver and the pearl was in a fragile, remarkable setting. The small fronds of

silver were set with tiny, perfect diamonds to look like leaves that the pearl was falling from like a flawless raindrop.

“It is obviously handmade, privately, I believe, since the watermark is not one I know of,” Owen commented, a man much familiar with trinkery and ladies’ accessories. He bought many for his various dalliances. “It must be easily more five hundred pounds, I believe.”

Barrow’s eyes widened as he looked at the dainty thing. Henry could see that part of him was clearly regretting handing the thing over, since it could fetch such a pretty penny.

“How strange,” Henry mused, watching as the glowing surface of the pearl caught the dim candlelight. “It looks familiar to me...Like I have seen it before.”

“Oh?” Owen glanced at Barrow and realised they were crossing into territory where it was no longer appropriate for Barrow to listen. “Thank you for your time, good sir. We shall make sure you are compensated accordingly.”

“Very good, my lord.” Barrow touched his forelock as he stood, clearly mollified by the fact he was getting something out of the exchange, even if it were not five hundred pounds.

“Thank you, Barrow,” Owen said, smiling as the innkeeper left than lowering his voice so only Henry could hear. “You recognise it?”

“Aye.” Henry turned it thoughtfully in his hands, his frustration building. “Ah, it’s on the edge of my brain, I know it is!”

“Well then, there’s nothing to be done at the moment.” Owen pushed him gently, trying to placate him. “Let us ride home to your wife.”

“There is something to be done.” Henry looked over to the bar. “Barrow! Two ales please!”

“Really?” Owen raised his eyebrows at his friend. “I thought you were eager for your wife’s company?”

“I have no desire to return with news of my failure to provide adequate answers,” Henry said shortly. His memories of his

embarrassment in the church were haunting him, along with the nagging feeling that the answers he wanted were staring him right in the face. “Besides, we have a puzzle to solve.”

“And you think ale will help with that?” Owen asked.

“It could not hurt.” Henry grinned, staring down at the pearl again, willing it to give him the answers he wanted. It was the only way to find the woman who had tried so hard to ruin his life. “I must remember, Owen. I must.”



Matilda stared out of the window, hopelessly looking for her husband to return. It had been hours. The night was dwindling away, soon it would be close to midnight and still Henry had not come back from his errand with Owen. Matilda couldn't understand it. She ran over their last words together in her mind, trying to decipher any hidden discomfort under his words. She found nothing. He had looked at her with such eager intensity, his thumb rubbing small circles on the back of her hand. She had seen in his eyes all the desire she had felt and witnessed in the orchard.

She had rushed upstairs, calling for Betty and instantly throwing her clothes off so she could indulge in a long, extensive bath with rose petals and wash her hair with luxurious jasmine soap. Her stomach had fluttered with excitement as she had undressed, realising that the top of her thighs in-between her legs were slick with her own desire. She had never experienced anything like it, even in her own times of pleasure. She had flushed in the warm water to remember that Henry had, in fact, *asked* her about such times. It caused a twinge in her lower abdomen and for the hair on the back of her neck to stand up on end when she thought about how she might answer him that evening. She had never imagined that she might talk about such a thing with a lover, share such intimacies, but somehow, with Henry, it didn't seem strange or daunting. In fact, the whole prospect seemed thrilling. Their play together in the orchard had felt so easy, she had been filled with a confidence she had never expected. She had even *touched* him intimately, reached out for him to encourage him to press against her, in an entirely wanton fashion! With just the thought of it, Matilda groaned and pressed her red face into her damp hands, then dipping down under the water to hide her own sudden embarrassment. Yet she hadn't been embarrassed at the time. She had

been eager, and she wasn't afraid or ashamed now as she thought about it. Perhaps merely astonished that Henry was able to bring out such a side of her.

In the past she had wanted to kiss him, she had dreamt of marrying him, she had fantasised waking in his arms as they travelled the world together, but she had never *wanted* him in the way she had today. In the orchard, she had burned for him and she had felt and seen that he burned for her too. She knew that some wives were fearful of their first intimacies with her husband, but Matilda felt no such dread. It was only flickering excitement she felt as she had climbed out of the bath and dressed in one of her finest, most alluring nightdresses. It was the finest, thinnest white cotton, adorned with delicate lace at the cuffs and collar. She had Betty hand dry her dark hair and leave it loose like a dark canopy, so she looked every inch the alluring, virginal heroine. She had sat, waiting for her husband as one hour turned to two, then two to three, then evening turned to night and Henry still had not returned.

"My Lady? Have you need of anything?" Betty asked quietly behind her. Matilda turned to see her tired maid standing at the doorway, a look of intense pity and compassion on her face. Matilda glanced at the clock, seeing that the day was nearly turning to morning. Betty had held vigil with her, but it was time to admit defeat. Henry wasn't coming to her tonight. Any husband who tried to come to his wife in the depths of the night was not a husband who deserved entrance.

"I don't." Matilda turned back to the window, staring over the dark grounds of their home. There was no sign of movement. "Thank you Betty, I am going to bed now."

"Yes, my lady," Betty said softly. "Sleep well."

Matilda waited until she heard the door close behind her and then went to her desk, pulling out her diary. She flicked through the pages. She had written sparsely since she had been married, just little notes of her discontent, her sadness. Then, earlier that evening whilst waiting for Henry, she had poured her heart onto the page, describing in detail their encounter and the feelings it had raised in her. She looked at the words, barely hours old, written in her own hand:

I think this could be the start of something real between us, something more than friends. The ice that has frozen over between us seems thawed, as if

the heat of our embraces dissolved it. When I looked into his eyes I saw my old friend, it is true, but also so much more. Perhaps this is what it feels like to be loved by one's husband.

Matilda stared at the words, finally letting her tears fall, blotting the ink on the page. She felt foolish. She felt as if somehow, somewhere, she had misunderstood a vital signal. Either way, Henry had not kept his promise, that much was certain. Swallowing heavily, she dipped her pen in the ink and wrote one single line before closing the diary and blowing out the candle:

I don't know what I did wrong.

Chapter Twenty-One

“*H*enry! Linfield! Wake up!”

Henry winced against the bright light hurting his eyes. He coughed and turned, his face peeling away from hot leather as he rolled over, his stomach lurching. He was in his library at home. Sitting across from him in the armchair, looking distinctly worse for the wear, was Owen.

“Holy hell,” Henry moaned, rubbing the heels of his hands into his eyes, pressing against the knot of pain welling inside his skull. “Must you shout?”

“You were snoring like a damned bear,” Owen growled, doing his own impression of one. “It went right through my head. Lord!”

Owen leaned forward letting his arms rest on his knees and his head flop between them.

“This was not one of our better decisions, my friend,” Owen groaned, looking positively sick.

Henry nodded, swallowing hard. His mouth felt sticky, as if it were full of cotton.

“I shall call for some breakfast.” Owen nodded dismally as Henry pushed himself up into a seated position, his head swimming. “Mrs York! Mrs York!”

“Christ,” Owen hissed between his teeth. “The noise!”

They both winced as the door opened and Mrs York walked in, looking down at the young lords with the kind of wry amusement

Henry had not seen since he was a boy, the night he had drunk too much sherry at his first ball.

“Yes, my lord?” Mrs York asked, clasping her hands in front, and smiling tightly down at him.

“We find ourselves in need of some refreshment,” Henry croaked.

“And elucidation,” Owen added brokenly. “For I remember not one thing since we returned here.”

“Me neither.” Henry squinted, trying to organise the bungled memories flashing through his mind. “Mrs York? Might you enlighten us?”

“Of course, my lord,” Mrs York said, “you and Lord Barton returned home just past midnight. You were in high spirits and had indulged at the inn, if I am to understand correctly.”

“Yes, yes, we recall that.” Henry winced, bleakly remembering one too many ales and a decidedly unwise ride home. “When we returned?”

“Lord Barton was too compromised to ride home so my lord was kind enough to offer him a room for the night. We were, of course, prepared and I offered to provide my lords with a late supper in their bedchambers, but my lord saw fit to continue in revelry. You were determined to continue an investigation of some sort.” Mrs York pursed her lips slightly, as if she doubted that such an investigation had been undertaken. “Your steward, Harris, invited my lords to retire when the clock struck three and was not needed.”

Henry vaguely remembered falling into slumber when the dawn chorus began at four in the morning. *Good God, what was I thinking?* When he looked into Mrs York’s eyes he saw all the disapproval of a woman who had seen this outcome hours ago. It was almost as bad as being confronted by his mother after a night of revelry. Mrs York had always warned him as a youth to be careful with his liquor or suffer the consequences. *I told you so*, those familiar eyes said.

“Thank you, Mrs York.” Henry closed his and nodded slightly, his own apology for lack of care. He could manage nothing more at that moment, his stomach rolling.

“Can I bring you some refreshment, my lord? Something to ease your discomfort?” Mrs York asked in a sugary tone.

“Yes please,” Henry croaked. “Some of your morning cure, if you would be so kind.”

“And coffee,” Owen rasped, head hung low between his knees. “A whole pot, I beg you.”

“Of course, my lords.” Mrs York curtsied and walked back towards the door, pausing to wrench open the curtains at the window. Both men fell back, flinching from the brutal morning light.

“What time is it, Mrs York?” Henry enquired, letting his forearm fall across his face, shading his eyes.

“It is just gone nine, my lord,” she said, before opening the door for Harris, the steward. The pleasing smell of coffee filled the study. “I anticipated your requirements, my lords. It is not my first time tending to those who caught the rough side of the bottle.”

“Mrs York, bless you and all of your staff,” Owen said fervently, leaning forward to sniff the pot as Mrs York set it down. “I mean it, you are the Lord’s angels and his army all at once.”

“You are too kind, Lord Barton.” Mrs York smiled, pouring a cup of coffee for Owen who basically began to inhale it.

“For you too, sir,” Harris said, setting a glass of reddish looking thick liquid with a pungent scent of garlic.

“Good God, Henry, what is that?” Owen looked at it suspiciously, his nose curling at the smell coming from it.

“Mrs York’s famed morning cure,” Harris said, stepping back.

“And what, pray tell, gives it such a distinctive colour?” Owen asked warily.

“That would be the crushed tomato and egg yolk, my lord,” Mrs York said smartly. “My lord the Colonel had me provide the perfect morning cure to follow his merrier nights. This is the recipe he swore

by.”

“It is?” Owen asked doubtfully.

“What it is, is the answer to my woes,” Henry said, ignoring the pungent scent and toasting to Mrs York. “To your health, Mrs York.”

Wincing he gulped it down, trying not to gag at the thick, slippery feel of it. When he had swallowed the whole thing and shuddered, he swallowed heavily, willing the medicine to settle in his stomach. Owen watched him warily, as if expecting him to see him throw it back up any moment. After a tense few seconds, Henry breathed out and smiled at the others.

“Thank you,” he said.

Mrs York nodded approvingly and then poured him a cup of coffee.

“I see we are sharing.” Owen raised his eyebrows, pretending to be miffed. “I thought I had laid claim to all the coffee in the house.”

“We have another pot coming, my lord.” Mrs York chuckled. “This was made for breakfast but there was no need of it.”

Breakfast. *Breakfast*. Where he usually sat with his *wife*.

“Damn!” Henry jumped up, nearly spilling his cup and Owen swore rudely as hot coffee sloshed onto his breeches. “My wife!”

Henry made to move quickly to the door to go and apologise to Matilda, but found that his head was tilting as if he had just come off a ship and was forced to sit back down, groaning. Mrs York tutted at them both, handing Owen a napkin with a flourish as Harris tentatively pushed Henry’s coffee cup back toward him.

“Remembered you have one, did you?” Owen glared, dabbing his trousers. “God in heaven, the liquor really did scramble your memory, didn’t it?”

“I was supposed to see her last night,” Henry groaned, covering his face with his hands. He looked up at Mrs York and saw the displeasure on her face. “How long did she wait for me, Mrs York?”

“I could not say, my lord,” Mrs York said, just as Harris the steward, who was younger and less experienced blurted out: “Until eleven.”

“Eleven?” Henry groaned. He had ridden away with Owen before six. Nearly six hours later and his wife had still been waiting for him. He could not imagine her disappointment, her feelings of neglect. Thinking of it was even worse than the thumping headache he was enduring.

Mrs York glared hard and Harris who promptly bowed, blushing profusely, and left the library. Mrs York lifted one of the cloches to reveal some bacon and eggs. Owen’s eyes lit up at the prospect. Mrs York began to serve them, a task she would usually leave to their discretion, but Henry could tell she wanted him to endure her disapproving presence for a little while longer. She could no longer berate him for bad behaviour as she had done when he was a boy, but she had no need to. Henry sighed.

“How was Lady Linfield this morning, Mrs York?” he asked softly as Owen tucked into a hearty breakfast.

“I could not say, my lord,” Mrs York answered stiffly.

“She has not risen yet?” Henry winced, imagining that she must have stayed up much later than Harris had said if she had not woken at her usual time to take breakfast at eight.

“She has risen, my lord.” Mrs York stepped back, meeting Henry’s gaze steadily. “She did not break her fast this morning. She went on one of her rides early. She was gone by seven.”

“She’s gone?” Henry echoed, hollowly. “Where?”

“She did not make it known to us, my lord,” Mrs York said.

“She left no note, no word?”

“Not with me, my lord.”

“What does Betty say?” Henry demanded.

“Betty said only that my lady seemed subdued and tired, and had said

that she was in need of company this morning,” Mrs York said.

“Company,” Henry echoed dully, his nagging fears of potential love affairs resurfacing with the gnawing in his stomach.

“Just so, my lord.”

Henry stared at his housekeeper. In her steady, heavy glare he found all the reproach he knew he deserved.

You did not honour your commitment to your wife. How can you expect anything less?

“Thank you, Mrs York,” Henry said, picking up his coffee and taking a sip.

Mrs York left, and Owen watched him carefully, chewing on bacon fat, his colour returning to his cheeks.

“You are suspicious,” Owen stated.

“Would you not be?” Henry retorted sharply, but Owen only shrugged.

“If I were married to a lady like Matilda and I had neglected her for a night of drunken revelry with my best man, I would allow her whatever freedom she desired.” Owen swallowed and took a sip of coffee. “That was your arrangement, after all.”

“Maybe that arrangement no longer suits me.” Henry set down his coffee cup with a firm tap of china. “She is *my* wife, dammit! I don’t want to share her.”

Owen looked a little surprised by his outburst but sipped his coffee slowly, considering his words.

“Well, then maybe you should stop focusing on the woman from the church and start focusing on the woman you are married to,” Owen said.

“Supposing she has not already found someone else,” Henry muttered, darkly.

“Don’t, Henry.” Owen looked at his friend earnestly. “Don’t be taken over by jealousy of a phantom. You have no proof she is seeking affections elsewhere. Don’t give into it.”

He thought of Matilda’s blue eyes, like chips of glass. He thought of her warm body, quick and responsive underneath him. He thought of the delicate velvet of the most secret part of her, slick on his fingers. The thought of her going to another man because of his failings was even more nauseating than all of the alcohol curdling in his stomach. Jealousy was like fire in his veins. It was, after all, easier to bear jealousy than the guilt he felt over abandoning him.

“It’s not that easy,” Henry said.



“It’s so good of you to visit, dear Matilda,” Julia said, pouring a cup of tea for them both in the sunroom at the back of Julia’s house. “What an unexpected treat, and so early in the morning.”

“Well, I was in need of company,” Matilda said simply, “and I know you rise early, dear Julia.”

“Indeed, I do.” Julia smiled happily. “I have not seen you since your wedding. How does married life suit you?”

“It suits fine,” Matilda said shortly, sipping her tea. It was a light, fragrant blend and reminded her instantly of her dear Mama. Her eyes prickled with unexpected tears. How she wished she could go to her mother with her sadness, but she couldn’t bear to see her own disappointment. Her mother would worry that she had indeed married too quickly, that Henry had not reformed from his gadabout ways and then Matilda would inevitably have to bear her own father’s disappointment, too. It was too much, but keeping her misery from them was its own kind of torture.

“My dear? Are you well?” Julia reached out, clasping her hand tenderly, her eyes full of concern.

“I’m so sorry, Julia, I do not mean to be so emotional,” Matilda gasped, blinking back tears.

“You need not be afraid of showing your feelings here, Matilda,” Julia

said quietly. "I know I like to gossip now and then, but I promise, nothing you say to me in confidence would ever be repeated. We have been friends for so long. I would not jeopardise that."

"Thank you, Julia." Matilda looked down at their clasped hands, thankful for Julia's honesty. It would feel good to unburden herself, even if she could not reveal the whole story. She took a deep breath and sighed.

"I am afraid that my husband is displeased with me," she began slowly.

"Henry?" Julia frowned. "Henry could never be displeased with you, Matilda. You have been friends nearly all your lives, practically best friends, and besides." Julia squeezed her hand comfortingly, "he is besotted with you. Everyone saw the way you took his breath away at your wedding breakfast. He looked as if he could not wait to whisk you away on a honeymoon!"

"And yet he has not," Matilda said in a quiet voice, afraid to meet her friend's eye.

"Ah." Julia flushed at the implications of her words but seemed to steel herself to support her friend.

"He didn't come home until late last night," Matilda confessed. "The middle of the night, no less, and with Lord Barton in tow."

"And that angered you?" Julia asked.

"Of course, it did!" Matilda's anger re-lighting as she recalled tossing and turning in the night, hearing their raucous singing and laughing downstairs and resenting every moment of it. It was why she had fled the house so early that morning. She thought she could not bear to see them in that state. "They were drinking heavily all night my maid told me, come home merry from...God knows where."

Matilda winced to remember Lulu's cruel words. *He has a new bedwarmer every week.* Had Henry been aroused by their encounter in the orchard and then taken that arousal elsewhere? Perhaps to his club where he and Owen could drink and gamble and indulge discreetly in loose women? She felt a flush of shame just to think of it.

“Matilda.” Julia touched her arm knowingly. “You must know, my dear, that some gentlemen need time to come close to their wives.”

“You said we were practically best friends, how much more time could he need? How long should I wait for him to finish his dalliances?” Matilda asked dully. “I have given him so many years of my life, Julia, so many years wanting him and now...”

“I know,” Julia spoke softly. To anyone else, it may have sounded simply comforting but Matilda understood the depth of meaning in those words. Julia had always dropped teasing hints that she knew of Matilda’s affection for Henry, but this was the first time she had admitted seriously that she had been aware of Matilda’s longing for him. Matilda found herself choking back words, unable to speak. Between them sat all of her expectations of what her marriage to Henry could have been.

“I know what you dreamt of, my friend, but life is not always a fairy story,” Julia said tenderly. “Yet all hope is not lost. You must remember, Henry will be obliged to continue his line and that is something he cannot do anywhere but in your marriage bed. All lords require heirs. He will come to you soon, I am sure.”

“I do not want him to come to me as an obligation.” Matilda frowned, sniffing hard. “I want him to come to me as I come to him, filled with longing, filled with...”

She stumbled over the word ‘love’ but she knew that Julia had understood.

“Well, that might take a man like Henry more time,” Julia said gently. “He has not thought of you the way you have always thought of him. Perhaps you need to wait until he decides to instigate the more... physical aspects of your marriage. Once he does, I am sure he will not be able to stay away.”

Matilda’s heart sank. That was exactly what she was afraid of. She didn’t want to admit that he had already instigated it and had turned away from her. Perhaps she had not pleased him as she thought she had? She couldn’t understand it. Was she truly so bad at reading Henry’s feelings that she had mistaken disinterest for real lust? Was she being punished for the lie she had told in the church that day? That since she had stood in the way of Henry’s future then, fate was

twisting her life to bring that unhappiness back to her? She groaned and closed her eyes, rubbing her brow intensely.

“This is not how it was supposed to be,” she muttered.

“Perhaps you focus a little too much on the fantasy of being married to him,” Julia said quietly, rubbing Matilda’s back. “The reality of married life can be messy, turbulent. You have longed for him for so long, you are not prepared when the path you find yourself on is rockier than expected.”

Matilda could sense the grain of truth in this. Though Julia couldn’t know the details of their intimacies, and the deeper complexity of Matilda carrying the burden of her hideous lie, she still had a point about Matilda’s expectations. She had been dreaming of Henry as an adolescent, her fantasy filled with endless sun-filled days and laughter. Real life was not like that. She should know, she had seen enough of the dark moments of it. It was time to stop childishly hoping for a perfect marriage.

“What can I do then?” Matilda asked bleakly. “If I cannot make him want me...”

“Try to manage your emotions, dearest. Perhaps be a little cool with him, reveal some of your disappointment, but not so much as to deter him,” Julia said, stroking her hair. “Gentlemen need little hints now and then, but you must remain dignified. You must continue to communicate with him. You are not children anymore.”

Matilda thought longingly of those times when they were young, reading in the treehouse, splashing in the river, enjoying each other’s company. If she had known then that the reality of being married to her one love would be so difficult, would she perhaps have reviewed her infatuation? Would it perhaps have been better to simply enjoy loving him in adolescence without ever having to endure this pain of love in adulthood? Matilda had never thought she would find herself at this point. She was actually starting to think she regretted loving him. Nothing was simple anymore.

“No, we are not,” she said sadly.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Julia was able to lift Matilda's spirits enough throughout the morning that she was able to face a short visit to her family before returning back to Glavensborne. Her mother and father were out on estate business but Holton and Barty greeted her joyfully.

"Tilly!" Barty shrieked, throwing himself at his sister's legs with abandon and displaying just how much he had missed her. "You're back! Have you come to stay?"

"No, Barty." Matilda smiled, petting her brother's strawberry blonde hair affectionately. "Just for a brief visit."

"Since Mama and Papa are out can we do something fun?" Barty stared up at her owlishly. "Can we play cricket?"

"Yes, we can play cricket." Matilda laughed. "As long as Holton will field for us."

"I should be happy to." Holton bowed formally but his dark, knowing eyes displayed an affectionate twinkle. "As long as the young master restrains himself from batting the ball straight into the lake."

"No promises!" Barty giggled, running away to grab the equipment.

Holton turned to Matilda as they followed Barty along, smiling softly.

"Lord Linfield is not with you today," he commented quietly. Matilda's heart clenched.

"He had business at home." She swallowed hard. She hated lying to Holton. "He sends his best wishes."

“You rode alone?” Holton’s question held no hint of judgement, only concern.

“As is my custom.” Matilda smiled.

“Your parents shall be sad to have missed you,” he said quietly. “Are you well?”

“Of course, I am.” Matilda batted the comment away without meeting Holton’s eye. “I am sad to have missed them also.”

Secretly, Matilda thought it was probably for the best she hadn’t met her parents today. She could defer Holton, but there was no way her parents would allow her to hide the truth. After an hour or two playing with Barty, Matilda was happy and content but also ready to ride home.

“Come back soon!” Barty called as she set off. “Bring Henry! Then we can play two on two!”

Matilda waved over her shoulder, watching her brother and Holton turn and walk back into the Sinclair Manor. There was small twinge of sadness that she wasn’t going with them. Yet the day was clear and the ride back over the fields to Glavensborne was fresh and revitalising. By the time she dismounted outside the house, she was flushed and smiling. She was walking into the house, thinking happily to herself about a tall hedge she and Shakespeare had easily cleared on the way back, when she heard a voice cough from the library door. She looked up to see Henry standing there. He looked a little worse for the wear, perhaps more tired around the eyes, but otherwise well. Looking at him, Matilda was reminded of her resentment at his behaviour from the night before.

“You look happy,” Henry commented. His tone did not imply that her joy made him happy. In fact, he looked downright displeased. It raised Matilda’s own ire. Who was he to be displeased with her? She was not the one who had been irresponsibly indulging the night before.

“You look tired,” she retorted, raising her eyebrows. “A rough night, was it?”

Henry frowned but didn’t respond.

“No one knew where you had gone,” he said, shifting uncomfortably as he leaned against the doorframe of the library and scowling a little. “You left no note, no explanation.”

“I could have said the same for you.” Matilda pulled off her riding gloves with sharp, angry movements.

Again, Henry did not respond. He looked her up and down slowly, taking in her gown. She was wearing one of her favourite riding habits, a shocking bright violet spencer with a matching gown underneath. She wore it with her favourite bonnet, a miniature gentleman’s top hat with peacock feathers on it. She felt slightly uncomfortable being perused by him, because it was not the same soft, eager erotic gaze that she had fallen into in the orchard. Rather, his eyes looked angry.

“You look beautiful,” he said. She saw his hand resting against the doorframe clench into a fist. “Where were you gone, dressed so finely?”

Matilda flinched, feeling a barb underneath his words but not entirely sure what it was.

“I took breakfast at Julia’s,” she said, reaching up to unpin her bonnet and set it on the hall dresser. “Then I dropped in on my brother and Holton. Then I rode home.”

“Really?” Henry deliberately raked his eyes over her dress in disbelief. “It seems like a particularly alluring outfit for a breakfast with friends and a visit with your infant brother.”

“Well, that is where I went,” Matilda said, unbuttoning the rich, velvet bodice of her spencer and tossing it onto the dresser too. His perusal and the tension between them were making her warm. With her gown unveiled, Henry’s eyes widened.

“I find that hard to believe,” he said quietly.

“Why?” Matilda stared down at her gown, spreading her arms wide. It was a simple, velvet gown to Matilda’s eyes, durable for riding and a bold colour so she could be seen and spotted easily by any rogue poachers around. The sleeves were long for warmth during long rides, the neckline was square and unfussy to fit easily under the high neck

of her spencer. She could not understand it, then she looked into Henry's eyes and recognised the emotion she saw there. *Jealousy*. Henry, for some reason, was jealous. It was too much to handle.

"Well, where do you think I was?" Matilda snapped, glaring at him.

"I don't know!" Henry snapped back. "You were up early, gone before breakfast —"

"We were both up in the early hours, Henry," Matilda reminded him curtly, "and I had thought that you would probably have had little need of breakfast this morning. Or desire to see your wife, after your adventures of the night."

Henry's eyes flashed angrily at the implication and she thought he might shout at her. Instead, he stepped aside, gesturing for her to enter.

"Please come in," he said, jaw set.

Matilda hesitated. She had half a mind to ignore him, to run upstairs and give him a taste of his own medicine being neglected, but then she remembered Julia's advice: *You must remain dignified. You must continue to communicate with him. You are not children anymore*. Nodding stiffly, she followed him into the library. She wrinkled her nose slightly as she did. It still had the lingering male scent of alcohol, smoke and sweat. Mrs York was obviously giving it her best effort to air it out, with all the windows open and some beeswax candles lit, but the evidence that her husband had neglected her for a night of gentleman's revelry couldn't entirely be erased. Matilda took a deep breath, trying to control her resentment. Unfortunately, it did not seem that Henry had the same control.

"If you are going to take a lover, I am going to require you to be significantly more discreet, my lady," he snapped, closing the door behind him with a bang.

"Excuse me?" Matilda's mouth dropped open as she stared at him, her mind blinded with rage. Dignity went out of the window. For a second, she was reminded of a time when Henry had cheated in a game during their childhood. The same sense of injustice flooded her at that moment. "You accuse me of being unfaithful? Me?"

“I am not accusing you of anything.” Henry folded his arms and glared at her, trying, and failing to look detached. “I am merely commenting that any *company* you keep —”

Matilda gritted her teeth at his choice of words. That morning, she had told Betty she needed company. How dare he use her loneliness against her?

“ — must be done with the utmost discretion. Our reputation is fragile at the moment and needs protecting.”

“Oh really?” Matilda exclaimed. “Did it need protecting last night too?”

“What are you implying?” Henry demanded.

“Only that you hold yourself to the same standards,” Matilda snapped. “That whatever club or whorehouse you drank yourself into last night with Owen, whatever *company* the two of you decided to engage, it was done with equal discretion!”

“You have a very high opinion of my friends, I see.” Henry’s eyes were flashing dangerously but Matilda didn’t care. None of his accusations were fair!

“Every person in London knows the reputation of Lord Barton and Lord Linfield when they go carousing. ” Matilda shook her head scornfully. “Then you had the kindness to bring it home with you.”

“I shall bring home what I like!” Henry snapped. “Our arrangement was too free us both, was it not?”

“Indeed!” Matilda shouted, trying to push past him to stride out of the door. “But if our deal was for mutual independence, one has to wonder why you are inquiring so insultingly into my freedoms!”

“Because I care about you!” Henry shouted back, seizing her arm forcefully and holding her in place, “I will not suffer another scandal!”

“Oh, I see, you care about me as long as I do not embarrass you?” Matilda tried to pull her arm from his grip, but it was too tight, his green eyes blazing.

“That is not what I meant,” Henry growled.

“Was it not?” Matilda demanded, refusing to break eye contact with him. She would not be the one to do it.

“No,” Henry snapped, “we are friends.”

It was the first time Matilda had flinched at the word and she felt icy rage flooding her.

“We are not friends, Henry,” she spat, not caring at the hurt in his eyes. “We are married, I am your wife!”

“I know that,” Henry growled. “Do you?”

“Oh, I am abundantly aware of it!” Matilda laughed humourlessly, her eyes glaring daggers at him. “I am aware for the first time of a wife’s embarrassment! Having a husband gallivanting off into the night with no word —”

“Before we were even wed, I promised not to humiliate you, did I not?” Henry interrupted, tugging her closer. “Can you say the same?”

“I have done nothing that requires scrutiny!” Matilda glared up at him. “And your promise means little now. I should have required a more specific wording, since my husband cannot be bound by what he has vowed before God —.”

“I have not broken my vow!” Henry’s voice echoed around the library as he held her close, chest rising and falling with the exertion of their disagreement. “I have laid with no other, I have touched no other, can you say the same?”

“Of course I can, damn you!” Matilda cursed, tugging her arm away and watching his eyes widen at her uncouth language. Matilda didn’t care, she was shaking with rage. “I am your wife in name if not in deed, not that you care a bit about it.”

“I care.” Henry was reaching for her again, but Matilda shook her head, trying to bat his hands away. She felt like the foundations of their whole friendship were crumbling. Soon there would be nothing left.

“Really?” Matilda snorted sarcastically. “Because when a husband leaves his wife after touching her for the first time, when he disappears into the night and returns addled with ale, when he breaks his unspoken word to lay with her, it does not give her the strongest impression that he holds any affection for her whatsoever!”

“And when a wife rides away before dawn, dressed for a suitor, it does not give the strongest impression that her heart belongs to her husband!” Henry retorted angrily.

“You have always had my heart!” Matilda burst out, pushing him hard in the chest, just as she used to do when they were children. “You foolish, cruel man! My heart has always been yours!”

Matilda couldn’t stop the angry tears popping up in the corners of her eyes. Henry stumbled back from her, looking at her in amazement. Matilda dropped her arms and her gaze, feeling her rage drain out of her as quickly as it had arrived. Then, she saw his boots step into the circle of her vision as she stared at the floor. She looked up. Henry had a strange, almost determined expression on his face, something that looked like a combination of lust and frustration. Then he stepped even closer. Suddenly, Henry’s arms were around her and he was kissing her. Matilda melted against him, their kiss immediately ravenous as if all the words had been used up and now there was only passion. It was brutal, almost as if he wished to claim her, take her for his own, but Matilda felt no joy in it. Rather, it was animalistic need between them. She kissed him back furiously, bending her body pliantly to allow him to gather her to him, hands roving as he pushed her against the bookcase, volumes tumbling off the shelves around them. Matilda didn’t care. Let it all fall down around them. *Yes. Want me as I want you. Want me madly, want me so badly it hurts your heart.* She bit his lip and heard him groan angrily, she felt his hand pressed against her bosom and his other reaching down to rub quickly between her legs. She arched her back into his touch, feeling a sudden wave of pleasure but with it, also crashing sadness. *Not like this.* None of it was right. None of it was how it was supposed to be. She pushed him away.

“No, we can’t.” She stumbled back, her knees colliding with the couch and she set on the leather arm of it, feeling like soon she would cry.

“Matilda.” Henry tried to step towards her again, but she held up a shaking hand, the other over her face. “Did you mean it?”

“This was all a terrible idea.” She breathed heavily, trying to hold back her tears. She didn’t want to answer his question. She didn’t want to speak the words again. “We are tearing each other apart.”

“Matilda, come here,” he commanded, “answer me properly, did you mean what you said?”

He was tugging her hand urgently, but she whipped it away. She could see the lust in his eyes now, recognised it from the day before, but seeing it only brought back with it a profound sense of distrust.

“Oh, I should come to you, should I?” she asked, trying to sound caustic but it came out as frail. “So, you can have your fun and then run away again?”

“Is that what you really think of me?” Henry asked, voice taut with fury. “Of your friend? The man who has supposedly held your heart for so long? Do you care to explain that to me?”

“I do not care to explain, nor repeat myself, and you may trust my word or doubt it, I hardly care,” she said bleakly, staring up at him. “Because I don’t know what to think of you anymore, Henry.”

He stopped moving, watching her cautiously. His blonde hair was rumpled, the skin around his eyes slightly dark from his night of drinking. He let out a slow breath, gazing at her with something like tenderness, though Matilda found it hard to believe.

“Then I am sorry,” he said, running a hand through his hair and closing his eyes. “Beyond anything else, I always want you to know that I am your friend.”

Matilda stared at him. The heaviness of all the cruel words spoken between them hung in the air around them. She didn’t know what to think, or feel. She felt like whatever tender peace they had found together in the orchard had been smashed to pieces.

“Jesus, Henry.” She shook her head, her voice broken. “If I had known then, if I had known that loving you all these years would have led me to such desolate pain, I should never have laid eyes on you again.”

She covered her mouth, holding back a sob as tears trickled down her face. Henry stepped forward, staring down at her.

“Matilda,” he whispered. “Tills, look at me.”

Matilda hated herself for her compliance, but there was something inside her that could never ignore him when he used her name so familiarly. She looked up at him with wet eyes. His own were shiny, inquisitive, searching. Holding her gaze he tentatively tucked a dark curl behind her ear.

“I believe you, I believe that you meant what you said about having feelings for me, but I still have one question,” he said, softly. “How long?”

Matilda sighed and looked down, not wanting to see the pity there, but there was no point in keeping a secret now. She felt as if she was standing in the rubble of their relationship. She did not see a way forward to their marriage now, so the least she could do was speak the truth that had burdened her heart for so long.

“A long time.” She smiled bitterly. “You are quite difficult to forget, Henry Linfield.”

“You should have said,” he rebuked her softly, his finger trailing a warm line down her jaw.

“Does it even matter anymore?” she whispered sadly, closing her eyes.

“Oh, I think it matters very much, Tills,” he whispered back, leaning close.

Matilda watched him, feeling hesitant hope unfurling like spring leaves inside her chest.

“Why does it matter?” she asked. His mouth was a hairs breadth away from hers.

“Because,” Henry whispered, his voice a light chuckle against her lips. “I have feelings for you, too.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Henry kissed her, trying to put everything he felt into it, brushing away her tears with his thumbs and pulling her closer. Her words ran around in his mind, almost making him dizzy. *You have always had my heart. You have always had my heart.* Matilda had feelings for him. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by the idea, instead of feeling trapped, he felt ecstatic. He felt a tremendous pride that his wife, the woman he had given his name and his life to, was committed to him. There was no one else, only him. He felt as if he could walk on air.

“You mean it?” Matilda gasped, pulling away from his lips to stare into his eyes. “You truly have feelings for me?”

“Yes.” Henry smiled and dipped down his head to kiss her gently, “if this isn’t convincing you, then perhaps this will.”

He bent down and lifted her into his arms, enjoying the squeaking noise she made as he did so.

“Henry, what are you doing?” she squealed, giggling horrendously as he carried her like a bride out of the door.

“What do you think?” Henry grinned at her with eyebrows raised. “I’m taking my wife to bed.”

Henry carried Matilda upstairs in a fit of giggles, the two of them chuckling together as he kicked open the door to his bedchamber, carried her to the bed.

“I am surprised you made it all the way here,” Matilda said critically, gazing down at the stretch of fresh linen beneath her.

“How dare you?” Henry exclaimed, pretending to be annoyed.

“Well, you are hardly a spry young man anymore.” Matilda giggled, scrunching her nose up adorably.

“Well, if that’s how you feel.” Henry raised his eyebrows. “Perhaps I should drop you?”

“Don’t you dare!” Matilda shrieked, clutching at his shirt in a way that made him laugh aloud. “Don’t let me fall!”

“Well, what if I fall with you?” Henry smiled softly. “Would that be allowed?”

“I suppose so,” Matilda said, with pretend reluctance, the corners of her lips quirking gently.

“Well then, my lady.” Henry smiled and placed a knee on the bed and lowered his wife onto the feather mattress. “Let us fall together.”

She smiled and lifted her chin to be kissed. Henry was more than willing to oblige. Her lips were unbearably soft, her tongue warm and flickering against his. Henry felt himself groaning, pressing himself against her, already aroused by the memory of everything they had done together in the orchard. Matilda’s fingers were tugging at his stock, untangling it with a precision she had learned since yesterday, reaching down to unbutton his waistcoat, shucking it off his shoulders with practised ease. Soon, her hands had found the edge of his shirt and pulled it from his trousers, her rapid fingers easing it up over his head. Her eyes widened to see his bare chest, her little fingers tracing the outline of his stomach muscles. Suddenly, all Henry wanted was to see her naked. He had been desperate for a glimpse of her bare and writhing underneath him since yesterday. Sitting up and climbing off her, he tugged her shoulders upwards.

“Turn around,” he said breathlessly.

She obliged, twisting at the waist, and Henry set his attention to the row of violet buttons at the back of her gown.

“Not that I don’t admire your dress,” he said, leaning down to kiss her neck. “I just would enjoy seeing you out of it.”

“Oh, I know you admire it.” Matilda answered wryly, “since you accused me of being alluring in it.”

“You are always alluring,” he whispered, tugging the final button loose and twisting her back around. He reached down to gather the edge of heavy gown over her head. He took a sharp breath when he pulled it away. “Especially now.”

She was wearing only her stays and a skirt shift, in a palest, lightest cotton. The erotic couple of inches of bare skin between the bottom of her stays and the top of her shift skirt were overwhelming to him. He instantly groaned, lowering his mouth to press kisses along the bottom of her rib cage as Matilda fumbled with the buttons of his breeches. He gasped to feel an inquisitive finger brushing against the light brown curls around his manhood.

“Matilda,” he growled warningly, and felt Matilda’s stomach muscles shiver with laughter.

“I wonder,” she whispered, her finger making small circular motions. Henry felt his own muscles stiffen. “If I touched you as you touched me yesterday, might it have the same effect?”

Henry swallowed hard. He did not expect this from Matilda, she had only just described herself as ‘his wife in word if not in deed’ after all, but her flirtatious nature seemed to carry over into foreplay. She seemed to have a natural talent for it.

“You do not need to ...” Henry started to say, thinking that a woman who had no experience of gentleman might find a literal first-hand introduction to male anatomy quite daunting but Matilda interrupted.

“I want to.” Matilda sat up so they were both kneeling on the bed, gazing at one another. Matilda reached up and pulled the pins out of her hair, letting her raven black curls tumble down over her shoulders. Henry stared, suddenly having a flashback of a memory of when they used to swim in her father’s lake. Her hair would dry curly in the sun as they lay on the bank of the lake afterwards. He remembered the way the sun would bring out the blueish hue of it, like a magpie’s wing. He recalled once longing to touch it, but even at that time he had known he shouldn’t. He could now.

“What is it?” Matilda asked, unsure of herself.

“Your hair.” Henry smiled, reaching out to twirl a curl around his finger. “I used to admire it when we were younger.”

“Really?” Matilda smiled uncertainly. “I always admired you and your sisters, like blonde titans, so healthy and happy, tanned and bright.”

She ran her fingers appreciatively over his shoulders, leaning forward to press a reverent kiss to his collarbone, to the small arrow shaped scar that sat there. Henry took a shuddering breath.

“From the time you fell off jumping the hedge.” Matilda smiled, running her fingers over the scarred skin. “A piece of wire, was it not?”

“Yes.” Henry ran his hands up and down her arms, his fingers innately tracing the freckles he found there. “You always freckled in the sunshine. Especially here.” He brushed a thumb over her nose.

“You used to get them here.” She rubbed a thumb across his forearm, making the blonde hair there stand on end so that he shivered. “Your skin is so beautiful.”

He looked down at her, trying to discern if she was being mocking, but her face was actually full of gentle awe. Henry wondered with amazement if this was why things seemed so simple between them, so easy. They knew one another’s bodies already, had spent time admiring one another before. Maybe this was why everything felt raw and special, in a way it never had before. His previous amorous encounters had been with women whose company he enjoyed but not women that he knew and cared for. No one had ever looked at him with the same awe and desire that Matilda had.

“Thank you, Tills.” He smiled, pressing his palm against her cheek, and kissing her softly, wanting her to feel how much her words meant to him.

“So, what would happen?” Matilda whispered breathlessly, pressing her nose into his hand. “If I touched you?”

His body twitched in arousal at her words. She had this way to her, perhaps due to the unusual combination of her innocence coupled with her confidence with him due to their friendship that was both startling and undeniably erotic. The women he had taken to bed before rarely spoke to him. Their encounters were over and done with a series of grunts and cries. This was completely different, something he suspected that was unique to Matilda. To them. He tried to keep his

breath steady. On the one hand he wanted to wordlessly ravish her, for that was the path most familiar to him, but on the other he was intrigued by this vulnerable, gentle exploration by his friend. As he looked into her wide, guileless eyes, looking up at him so trustingly, he made his decision.

“I don’t know,” Henry gulped. “Perhaps we should find out together?”

Matilda smiled, nodding. Slowly she tugged at his trousers. Henry lifted his hips so she could pull them down to his knees, exposing his manhood, bare and tumescent. He’d not had a woman stare at him like this before with such curious tenderness. He felt quite unprotected. He waited for her, watching her avid face take him in, forcing himself not to move. Then, with the gentlest of touches, her soft fingertips glided up and down his shaft and Henry sucked in his breath tightly.

“Does it feel bad?” Matilda asked worriedly, instantly stilling her fingers, making to withdraw.

“No! Not at all,” Henry gasped, catching her wrist lightly. “I would only like to return the favour.”

Her slight shift was caught up around her knees, and it was easy for him to gently slide his hand underneath, finding her already damp and warm, her breath catching at his touch.

“Henry...” she whispered.

“Whatever feels right, Tills,” he answered breathlessly, not needing to spell it out. He rubbed his thumb down towards her opening, watching as she bit her lip. He felt himself twitch in her hand. He had never done this before, not so openly and brazenly, in the middle of the afternoon, no less. Soon his feelings of exposure vanished. Matilda’s hand began to stroke him more earnestly, mimicking the rhythm he was finding as he gently circled the small mound of nerves he found to be most sensitive to her.

“This feels ...” Matilda gasped, dropping her head back, her cheeks flushed.

“Yes,” Henry grunted, understanding words that she wasn’t able to speak. “Yes it does.”

Dear God in heaven she is flawless, she is perfect, I could finish just like this with her touching me...

Henry gasped out of his thoughts, jerking himself away from her suddenly.

"I'm sorry," Matilda whispered, "was I doing it wrong?"

"Of course not," Henry chuckled, breathing fast and staring up at the canopy above them. "Quite the contrary."

"So then why did we stop?" Matilda frowned slightly as his hand slipped back out from under her shift. She mewled a little at the movement, her body arching forward to follow his hand. Henry felt gratified by her desire. It matched his own so completely. Henry began pulling the ribbons of her stays loose.

"Because I want to take my time," Henry murmured, setting to work on the second ribbon, this time with his teeth.

"Oh!" Matilda gasped.

She seemed to hold her breath as he pushed her stays back off her shoulders, revealing her bare breasts. Henry began to kiss from her throat down to her pert nipple, enjoying the way her breath became ragged as he did. He looked up into her jewel toned eyes.

"I am merely hoping to provide you with the most exquisite first time, my lady."

"Henry," Matilda whispered, cupping his face, and tangling her fingers in the curls by his forehead. "It is already exquisite. It is with you."

Henry's heart clenched with affection. He kissed her palm and then reached down to tug the shift down over her hips and down her legs.

"Yet there is no need to rush." His mouth was dry, his voice hoarse. "I want to remember every moment of you like this."

Finally, she was naked on the bed, lying down beneath him, her dark hair spread out across the pillows.

“Lord, Tills.” He drew a soft line with his finger down from her chest to the dip of her navel, marvelling at how her back arched against him and she inhaled sharply. “You are stunning.”

“Thank you,” Matilda whispered, gesturing to his trousers. “Perhaps you can join me?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” Henry grinned, rolling on his back to shuck off his boots and trousers and then pulling up the patchwork quilt to cover their lower halves as he settled down beside her, tucking his arm around her waist to pull her close. It felt wonderful to hold her naked body against his, to kiss her gently, to feel her leg slide automatically between his, nudging against his straining manhood. They broke apart, looking at one another with the happiest of smiles.

“Hello there,” Matilda whispered, stroking his face tenderly. Henry had never felt this particular type of affection before; it wasn’t driven by passion, though he was mightily aroused. Somehow, it felt deeper, as if the friendship between them had forged deeper bonds that couldn’t be broken. *I’m lying in bed with my wife*, he realised. The thought made him feel like he was filling up with golden light.

“Hello wife,” he replied, kissing her neck.

“Wife,” Matilda repeated wondrously. “It feels strange to use those words when we are like this.”

“When we are what?” Henry looked down on her expectantly.

“When we are being...friendly.” Matilda struggled to find the words, but Henry understood.

“You feel like we make better friends than we do a married couple?” he asked quietly.

Matilda looked at him to check he wasn’t starting to quarrel but then nodded hesitantly.

“When I think of being your wife, I feel inadequate. Yet when I do this.” She reached forward and kissed him deeply, her hand settling softly on his thigh, rubbing up and down in a way that made him moan into her mouth. “I don’t feel inadequate at all.”

“That’s because you’re not, you are extraordinary,” Henry murmured, gently pushing her onto her back and slipping his leg between hers, parting them slightly. She looked up at him with her blue eyes glowing like gems, her hair as dark as the night. “Let me show how extraordinary you are.”

Henry lowered his head further down, nudging her thighs further apart with his nose.

“Henry?” she whispered above him, her fingers tight in his hair.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, his voice whispering into her sex. He felt her tremble as she felt his hot breath fall on her.

“Yes,” she whispered back.

His lips pressed against her wet skin in the softest of kisses. Above him, he felt Matilda stiffen, her hands trembling in his hair.

“Do not be afraid, Tills,” he whispered, his lips moving against warm, slick flesh. “Relax.”

He heard her moan above him, a soft, whimper that he had never heard her make before but was desperate to hear again. He groaned himself, his mouth widening over her, gasping his own pleasure into her. He could feel her tension mounting, could smell it in the subtle change of her, and sense it in the hitching of her breath. His tongue slid over her, licking desperately, tasting the deepest part of her and knowing, somehow knowing, that this was more than an act of passion. This was an act of love.

“Henry,” he heard her gasp above as she jerked his head back, fingers clenched painfully in his hair. When he looked into her eyes he saw a different woman. She was a wild beauty, skin like palest marble flushed pink, lips pronounced and parted desperately, sapphire eyes glinting in warning. *A goddess. How I worship her.*

“I need you now,” she panted, reaching down to clasp warm fingers around his shaft. Henry grunted, feeling his body jolt at her touch, already over-prepared for what came next. Yet he knew he still must be careful. No matter how familiar their romances were, no matter how easily they fell into the rhythms of love making, this was still his wife’s first time. He positioned himself carefully at her entrance,

taking shallow breaths to control himself. It seemed his wife had other ideas. She had canted her hips up towards him, taking his full length into her. Matilda cried out and arched her back, digging her fingernails into his shoulder so that Henry had to bite his lip to stop from cursing. Astonishingly, she began to nudge against him rhythmically and Henry couldn't help but curse aloud. When he looked into her eyes, he didn't see any trepidation, only a deep well of blue desire, egging him on. He tried to move slowly, tried to be cautious in this tenderest of moments, but Matilda continued to move with small, insistent thrusts.

She is going to make me lose my mind.

"Henry." Her voice was no more than a breath, a sound more than a name, but it was enough for Henry. He groaned and kissed her savagely, allowing himself to bury deep within her, up to the hilt, feeling her flex and tense around him. They stared at one another in a delightful moment that felt like eternity, and then Henry could hold back no longer.

He let go, thrusting shallowly at first, meeting her little nudges perfectly so that Matilda's eyes fluttered closed and her lips parted. He moved one hand down into the soft dark curls between her legs, beginning to rub in that familiar, gentle rhythm that echoed the pace of their own bodies. Matilda gasped, the tendons in her neck standing out as she stretched and strained against him. Henry didn't know if anyone had looked more beautiful than her in that moment. He only had a second to marvel because as she opened deeper, began to clench and spasm beneath him in such an enticing, alluring way, he began to thrust in earnest, losing all concept of reality. Their bodies met clumsily, almost ravenously. He could feel it building between them, the heat and savagery of the desire rushing towards its climax. There was a sharp, but delightful pain as Matilda bit his shoulder. In response, Henry's mouth fell on her long, swan like neck, sucking desperately, wanting to mark her as his. He groaned as she dragged nails across his shoulders, daring him to push deeper in, willing him onward towards oblivion. Then, as she curled her arms up around his neck and he thrust in deeper, she gave a different type of cry and he felt her whole body buck against him. It was more raw, instinctive, and Henry knew he had finally met that place inside her where the seat of her pleasure resided. He smiled against her salty flesh, took a moment to tangle one hand into her black curls and press his fingers against the spot between her legs, before thrusting mercilessly in again. Matilda screamed, her eyes suddenly staring up at him as if in

shock, as if she couldn't believe what her body was capable of. He kissed her softly, too overwhelmed to speak, but pouring all of his feelings into their kiss.

Don't be afraid, I will take care of you, I will give you more pleasure than you have ever known.

He pressed again, thrust again, held her steady as she trembled in his arms, taut as a bowstring, twitching and moaning. Henry could feel the flutterings of her release beginning, could sense it with every touch he gave her, every thrust, and every kiss. Henry briefly thought that it was nothing like his dream, yet a million times better. Dream Matilda had been soft and yielding, as gentle as a flower petal. The Matilda in his arms was raw and wild, like something from mythology, completely absorbing and utterly devastating. He could have never imagined pleasure like this, his body aching, his heart fit to burst, as they came together over and over, riding one another into abandon. Henry's mind became splintered, all cogent thought disappearing into sensation; her clenching warmth, the trembling tension of her muscles around him, the thunder of their heartbeats and finally, the whirlpool of desire that tugged him down, down, down until he was entirely drowned.

"Matilda!" he gasped, in between curses and groans, the explosion of his completion rocketing through him with a final, staggering thrust. As he spilled inside of her, as he heard Matilda's small, desperate cries of delight, one thought emerged from the fog of his pleasure. *I love her.*

Before he could process it, before he could challenge it or toss it away as merely erotic fantasy, Matilda came undone beneath him, crying out his name over and over as her fingernails dug painfully into his shoulders and her red lips mouthed against his collarbone.

"Henry!" she gasped. "God, Henry! My love!"

He felt it shudder through her in a way he had never experienced before, he felt it shudder through him, too, at the place of their joining and groaned again. For the first time ever, Henry felt a corresponding twitch of blood rushing to his manhood again. It had never happened to him so soon after completion, but then he had never lain with a woman like Matilda before. Even her fingertips were clenching and releasing against him, her whole body trembling like a

leaf as she continued to squeeze and flutter against him. Even in his spent, exhausted state, it felt divine.

The thought recurred. *I love her. I'm in love with Matilda.*

"Tills," he whispered, stroking her hair gently as she continued to lightly spasm against him, burrowing her face into his shoulder in utter exhaustion. *She called me 'my love.'* Was it just a moment of ecstasy or did she really mean it? Had perhaps the power of their pleasure been as clarifying for her as it had been for him? Now was clearly not the time to ask. Matilda was still breathing intensely, her rapid gasps warm against his neck. He knew she was overwhelmed already. He was overwhelmed and he at least was familiar with the act. He must be gentle.

"Tills, I am here, love. I am here."

He held her gently, pulling out as delicately as possible and then flopping on his back, tucking his wife carefully into his side. He brushed her wayward curls affectionately, filled with a need to make her feel safe and content. He had never wanted to cuddle with a woman before. This was truly a time of firsts for both of them.

"That was extraordinary," Matilda murmured sleepily.

"I told you." Henry smiled, stroking her arm softly. "*You* are extraordinary."

"I think *we* are," Matilda corrected, rubbing her nose into his chest before sighing heavily. "Are we still friends?"

"Always, Tills." Henry smiled, kissing the top her head. "As well as being married."

"Good." Matilda yawned. "Does it always make you sleepy?"

"Very often." Henry chuckled, thinking how adorable she looked with her dark, curly hair so wild and free and her skin so flushed. "Go to sleep, love."

As if on command, she did so, murmuring words he could not hear as she nestled her cheek against him. She had called him 'my love.' He

thought back over her words in the library. She had never said then that she loved him. She had said he had her heart, that she had feelings for him. Then he remembered something else she had said: *if I had known that loving you all these years would have led me to such desolate pain, I should never have laid eyes on you again.* Perhaps she hadn't noticed it, but she had said she had loved him. Henry felt his heart turn over with delight. He had called her 'love' so easily, almost as soon as they had been joined. Not only had he said it, but he had felt it. Deep inside, there was a rightness to the words he couldn't deny. For the first time since their wedding, he felt at peace. Even if she wasn't ready to say that she loved him outright, she had told him in every other way. One day soon they would say the words, he was sure. Smiling, he kissed the top of his wife's head affectionately.

"You have my heart too, Matilda," he whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Good morning, my love.”

Matilda rolled over sleepily, overjoyed to hear Henry’s whisper close to her ear. As she opened her eyes, she found his face staring down at her and felt her heart swelling with joy. *He’s still here. Here’s in bed with me. My husband.* The night before, after she had fallen asleep following their intimacies, she had woken in the late evening with a jolt. Henry had insisted they move into Matilda’s bedchamber where they had proceeded to make love once more, eat a late supper brought to them by a blushing and happy looking Betty and then fall asleep in one another’s arms. As Matilda had drifted to sleep she had thought of how it had been everything she had dreamed of. She had only hoped that he would still be there in the morning, and he was. Staring down at her with a frankly soppy, besotted smile and calling her *my love*. It made her stomach flip like a star-crossed adolescent and she giggled.

“Good morning husband,” she whispered, leaning in to be softly kissed. Henry did so, his warm lips pressed against hers as his hand tangled in her hair, holding a handful of dark curls. *He’s in bed with me. I just woke up with him.* Even in her sleepy morning state, Matilda skin prickled with the miracle of a dream come true.

“It is strange waking up with you,” she whispered, feeling him smile against her lips.

“Stranger for me,” Henry chortled. “You stole nearly all of the blankets at one point. It was like wrestling a bear to retrieve them.”

“I did not!” Matilda retorted, even though she felt sure it was likely she had done.

“Did to!” Henry raised his eyebrows at her. “It was still worth it,

however. To wake up to your face.”

Matilda flushed at this unexpectedly romantic comment and felt compelled to defer it.

“Really? With my hair like this?” She pulled at a curl, which seem to have taken on a life of its own. “I look like I just fell off a horse and got dragged through a bush.”

“You do a bit, yes!” Henry laughed, rubbing her neck softly. “But in the most delightful way. In fact,” his green eyes lit up with a little bit of mischief, “it’s making me feel positively amorous.”

“Oh, is it?” Matilda teased, leaning in to nip at his bare collarbone, feeling his breath hitch up inside his chest as she did.

“Don’t tempt me, seductress!” Henry growled, easily flipping her onto her back with her arms pinned above her head as Matilda giggled. “Or I will be forced to take action.”

“What might that be?” Matilda grinned as Henry leaned forward, as if to kiss her again. Then, suddenly, he attacked her with tickling fingers.

“Say the word, Tills!” he commanded as she rolled around in the bed, squirming with laughter. “Say the word!”

“I won’t!” Matilda gasped out between laughs.

“Oh, you will.” Henry grinned evilly above her, even reaching down to nip lightly at the soft skin of her breast. “Say the word!”

“Fine! Fine! Surrender!” Matilda exclaimed, grabbing his head between her hands and smiling up at him. “I surrender.”

“I knew it.” Henry laughed, falling down on top of her and nuzzling into her neck as Matilda held him close. It was wonderful, she realised, that they had finally found a way for the intimacy of their friendship to carry over into their marriage. She had never imagined that this playful, childish banter could be part of their romance.

“Is this real, Henry?” she asked softly. “It feels like everything has

fallen into place.”

“It does, doesn’t it?” Henry looked up at her and sighed contently. “We should do something to celebrate it.”

“What kind of celebration would that be? A celebration that a marriage isn’t a sham after all?” Matilda asked drily.

“Well, I wouldn’t word it like that, but I defer to my wife in these matters,” Henry joked. “We could have another picnic?”

“I have a better idea.” Matilda ran her fingers through his golden curls, and he made a soft, contented noise like a happy dog. “Let’s hold a ball.”

“A ball? Here?” Henry frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t know if we could accommodate a ball here, my love.”

Matilda tried not to flush hearing him call her that, but couldn’t help the wide grin forming on her face.

“Perhaps at Sinclair Manor then?” Matilda thought aloud. “It would be an excellent opportunity for Althea to make a match and for us to...”

“To rub our happiness in people’s faces? Perhaps your cousin?” Henry wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. “After the way she spoke to you at our wedding breakfast I’m not surprised. She is a nightmare isn’t she?”

“Lulu? Absolutely.” Matilda rolled her eyes. “If you think the way she spoke to me was bad you should have heard the choice words she had about you before we were wed.”

“Oh really?” Henry looked up at her with faux seriousness. “Were you gossiping about me, Lady Linfield?”

“Not at all, wouldn’t dream of it,” Matilda chuckled, bending down to press a kiss to her husband’s head. “All I will say is that a chance to prove all of Lulu’s gossip wrong would be most compelling.”

“A ball it shall be.” Henry tilted his head up, catching her lips with his. “By then, hopefully I shall have caught the woman at the church who humiliated me. We shall have no worries of further public

embarrassment.”

Matilda felt her heart stutter a little at his words. They had not discussed it since the wedding. She had no idea that Henry was still pursuing his line of inquiry. She had thought that once they had wed, he would have been distracted and forgotten all about it. Her stomach clenched to imagine what Henry would do if he found out now that she was the one who had derailed his family’s plans.

“I didn’t know that was still a worry for you,” she whispered, hoping that Henry couldn’t discern her racing heartbeat.

“I won’t let anything threaten our family, Tills.” He twisted his body up and caught her neck, kissing her savagely. When they broke apart his breath was ragged, full of feeling. “I won’t let anything hurt our reputation, your reputation. I will protect you, I promise.”

Matilda nodded mutely. She felt anything that she said would certainly reveal the sudden wave of panic she had felt. She had a sudden urge to get out. She felt like she was lying just being there with him. Carefully she extricated herself from Henry’s arm, shuffling to the edge of the bed.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Henry asked, tugging her hand.

“I am getting dressed.” Matilda smiled. “We have a day to start, my lord.”

“Oh, I see.” Henry rolled over, watching her reach for her stockings, pulling them on and then for her stays. “What shall you wear?”

“I don’t know, Betty shall come and choose.”

“Let me!” Henry jumped out of the bed, pulling his shirt over his head. He instantly crossed to her wardrobe, flinging the door open. “This one is beautiful!”

“That one?” Matilda laughed at him despite herself. He was holding her silver ballgown up against himself, his large, tanned feet showing out of the bottom and grinning at her. “That’s my ballgown Henry, I cannot wear it. I cannot ride in it, for starters.”

“But it’s stunning.” Henry reached for her with his spare hand, his warm fingers tracing the naked skin of her thigh above her stockings. “Though I have to say, you look perfect just as you are.”

“I’ll bear that in mind.” Matilda tried to chuckle lightly, standing up and pulling her shift over her head to hide the discomfort she was feeling. How intently was he looking for the woman in the church? Did she need to worry? For the first time since the night before, Matilda wished for some solitude to think it over.

“Now I shall need a dress, please, my lord.”

“This one.”

He handed over an imminently sensible gown. A firm, hardy royal blue long-sleeved gown with a puff of delicate white lace at the bust line.

“Blue again?” Matilda asked, pulling it on. She wished Henry would get dressed. He was very distracting, standing there in only his shirt, and she didn’t want to be distracted. Her stomach was flipping with anxious guilt and she needed some time to think. “If I were to have you as my wardrobe advisor every morning, would I wear nothing but blue?”

“Not quite my love.” Henry grinned cheekily and placed a kiss behind her ear before whispering, “I should have you wear blue *or* nothing. Allow me.”

He stood up and gently turned her around to do her buttons for her. With her back to him, Matilda let her smile drop for a second and tried to breathe deeply.

Calm down. He will surely forget all about that business now we are happy. It doesn’t mean anything.

“Now, I must set my hair,” Matilda said briskly, thinking that Henry would leave at this point, but he followed her to the vanity, watching as she combed out her curls. He leaned comfortably against the window, playing with the items by the mirror with infuriating informality. Matilda swallowed hard, trying not to wish him away as she focused on her reflection. If she asked Henry to leave, he would know that something was amiss. She would have to grit her teeth and

bear it, hold up the facade of being unperturbed a little while longer.

"I don't know why ladies need so many different things," Henry mused. "Bottles and trinkets and...what is this?"

With a jolt, Matilda realised that he had picked up her diary from the vanity.

"No!" she grabbed it back, her comb clattering to the floor. Henry stared at her in amazement. Matilda tried to get her heart to settle down. *If he opens it, he will know everything.*

"What was that, Tills?" he stared between her and the leather covered book, realisation dawning. "Wait...do you keep a diary?"

"It is not a diary, I am not an adolescent with dreams of writing novels," Matilda snapped, setting the book carefully back down out of reach. "I keep a journal. I have done since I turned sixteen."

"Oh really?" Henry folded his arms, grinning. "Do I ever feature?"

"Of course, you think you feature, no, Henry, it is not about you."

Matilda rolled her eyes, trying to hide the obvious lie. The very first entry in her journal had been about him. The last few had been about him, and many over the years had been about him too. If he ever read it, she would be utterly shamed. He would also never speak to her again, no doubt.

"Then what do you write about? Gossip? Political affairs? Oh!" Henry lowered his voice conspiratorially, "is it where you kept track of your previous suitors and proposals?"

"Whatever it is, it is quite private," Matilda warned him, swallowing hard. "So do not even think about it."

"You mean you don't want to share with me your little notes on why various duke's and viscount's were ineligible? I'm hurt." Henry clutched his hand to his chest, feigning pain. "I'm distraught. I feel abandoned!"

"Oh, I'm sure you do." Matilda sighed, reaching into her jewellery box

for her earrings. Part of her wanted to be amused but another part was still full of tension. It suddenly felt like Henry was too close. As if by having him in her chamber, he was one step closer to finding out all of her carefully guarded secrets. It was torturous. She wanted him here, wanted him desperately, but also wanted to push him away too.

“I don’t know how I shall go on!” Henry lamented, smiling ruefully, “I feel completely denied of my....what are those?”

Matilda turned, smiling to her husband finding his eyes fixed upon her face.

“What are what?” she asked, warily. She glanced at the diary, still on the table. He hadn’t opened it. So why was he looking at her like that?

“Your earrings.” He reached out and touched them softly, his fingers trailing against her soft skin. “Where did you get them?”

“These?” Matilda glanced in the mirror. “They were a gift from my Papa for my fourteenth birthday.”

“Your fourteenth...” Henry’s eyes widened. “I remember.”

“Do you really?” Matilda turned her head from side to side in the mirror, the pearls catching the morning light. “I rarely wear them now, especially since I lost the necklace that came with them —”

Matilda was speaking nervously, for some reason feeling like she had to continue rattling on so to divert whatever was coming towards her, even though she couldn’t identify it. Then Henry crossed to the end of the bed, to where his waistcoat lay strewn on the floor with her gown from yesterday. He pulled something out of the pocket and stood up. All of his movements were slow, deliberate, as if he were in a trance. Matilda held her breath. He turned and held the item out to her, staring at her face. Matilda looked down at the necklace. She took it reluctantly.

“Do you recognise it?” Henry asked quietly.

“Of course, it is mine it...” Matilda ran her finger over the clasp, tracing the engraving there. “It has my initial on it.”

Her heart jumped for a moment, a horrible lurch of trepidation.

“Where did you find it?”

“M for Matilda.” Henry ran his fingers through his hair, turning away from her. “M for Matilda, how could I not see it?”

“Henry?” Matilda asked cautiously, feeling like something was unravelling and there was nothing she could do to stop it. “Henry, where did you find it?”

“God, I’ve been so blind!” Henry shouted, turning back to her, his green eyes suddenly shiny and wet. “A woman on a stallion, riding as fast as man towards Sinclair estate, a woman who drops a pearl necklace at an inn on her way back from a church, how did I not see it before?”

Matilda stared at him, her stomach swooping as if the ground had disappeared beneath her and she was falling, falling fast. This was what she had been trying to defer, this was the moment she had sensed building so anxiously. His investigation had been much more thorough than she had ever imagined. Her secrets were no longer locked away in her diary, hidden from the eyes of the world. One sentence solidified in her mind, an unbearable but immutable truth: *He knows. Nothing will be the same now.*

Somehow, she channelled some of the strength of her father through her at that moment. She heard his voice from her childhood whispering gently: *own your mistakes*. Taking a deep breath, she unclasped the necklace and put it on, re-clasping it behind her neck with trembling hands. If nothing else, it felt right to have her father’s gift back. She looked up at him, holding back her tears.

“Ask me, Henry,” she said.

“Did you...are you...” Henry gulped and rubbed his hand across his face. “Christ above, I cannot believe this.”

“Henry,” she whispered.

“That woman came to the church, she besmirched my reputation in front of everyone, she lied about me, she gave false testimony in a house of God.” Henry was breathing heavily, staring at her with wild

eyes as if he wished he had never laid eyes on the necklace. “That woman is my *enemy*, and the enemy of my family! She ruined my sister’s prospects, she tarnished our name, she ruined my life!”

“Henry —”

“So please,” Henry interrupted, reaching out and grabbing her hands, squeezing them urgently, “please, my love, say that it wasn’t you. Say this is a mistake. Please.”

Matilda stared at him, tears beginning to trickle down her face. For the second time in as many days, she felt as if she was standing in the desolation of her marriage. This time, however, she knew it was over. This was something Henry would never forgive. Even though he was asking her to lie, even as he called her ‘love’ despite the anger in his eyes, Matilda knew he already knew the truth. There was no point in dissembling. Yet she still couldn’t quite bear to say it.

“Matilda!” Henry snapped and Matilda winced, immediately missing the familiar nickname, knowing that she would probably never hear it again. “Matilda, tell me it wasn’t you!”

“I can’t.” Matilda closed her eyes, tears falling down her cheeks. “I can’t, Henry.”

She felt him step back from her and instantly mourned his touch. Would she ever feel it again? Suddenly, she couldn’t just let him go.

“Henry, please,” she gasped, opening her eyes, and reaching for him, “let me explain —”

“Was it all a lie?” Henry asked. His jaw was set tightly, and Matilda could see the rage in his eyes. “All of it?”

“No, I promise, only this one thing, and I regretted it, I promise, I had no idea what would happen,” Matilda babbled, “please believe me!”

“Believe you?” Henry’s laugh was loud and harsh. It made her flinch. He was quickly tugging on his boots, trying not to meet her eye. “I don’t even know who you are any more.”

“I’m what I’ve always been,” Matilda whispered, brushing her tears

away with the back of her hand. "I'm your Tills."

Henry stood up, catching her eyes. She saw all the pain and betrayal there and longed to look away, but she couldn't. She needed Henry to see the utter desolation in her own eyes. Maybe then he would believe her and come back to her. He didn't move. Then, breaking Matilda's heart, he shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said quietly, opening the door. "Not anymore."

"What about me?" Matilda asked urgently, trying to provoke him. "What about the feelings you said you had? Do they mean nothing?"

It didn't work.

"I'm going up to stay at my club," Henry said curtly, before stepping out. "I'll write to Mrs York to make arrangements."

To make arrangements. Matilda knew what that meant. She tried not to sway where she stood, suddenly dizzy with it all. *Separate houses. Separate funding. Only communicating through solicitors. No children, no future.* It was worse than being a spinster. He truly intended to leave her. She didn't know if she could bear it.

"Henry!" Matilda said brokenly, throwing her last chance into the wind. "You still have my heart."

She swallowed hard, knowing she must say it now, if it was to make any difference at all.

"I love you," she whispered, staring at his broad shoulders and golden curls. She wished she could see his eyes.

Henry sighed, slumping as he looked down at the floor, but still, he didn't turn back to look at her. Her only answer was the door closing behind him.

Matilda gasped, listening to his footsteps on the floor and hearing him calling for the steward, demanding that the carriage be prepared. It was really happening. He was leaving her. He was really leaving her. She felt like her legs were going to go out from underneath her and she grabbed the bedpost, gasping for air.

“My lady, what has happened?” Betty cried, rushing to her side. “My lord is saying you are leaving for town?”

“Not me, just him.” Matilda’s voice shook. “He found out, Betty, he’s leaving me.”

“Oh, my lady, I am sure if you just explain to him.”

“No, it will do no good.” Matilda shook her head, trying to push down the rolling feeling of sickness. It suddenly felt like the walls were pushing in on her. She needed to get out. “I need to leave.”

“You can’t, my lady! You have to stay here. I am sure my lord will return soon, and he will forgive you —”

“He will never forgive me!” Matilda cried out, stumbling over to her vanity, stuffing her diary in her pocket and scrambling to pull her coat around her shoulders. “And I refuse to stay here, surrounded by memories of him whilst he talks to solicitors and finds the best way to abandon me.”

“He wouldn’t do that, my lady,” Betty tried to say soothingly. “At worst he would stay in London, you would live apart, free from one another.”

“So I would moulder away here, the deserted wife, whilst he goes back to gallivanting around London with God knows who? No.” Matilda shook her head violently, trying to ignore the tears falling on her hands as she pulled on her riding boots. “I shall not do it, I cannot bear it.”

“You wanted to be free, my lady, this is freedom,” Betty said.

“There is no freedom without Henry!” Matilda exclaimed, her voice cracking with emotion. She looked down at Betty, despair threatening to overtake her as she saw the pity in her maid’s eye. “There is nothing for me without him, and I am not such a fool to linger and hope that he will ever love me now as I love him. So I will go.”

“Where will you go, my lady?” Betty asked, following along as Matilda opened the door and, peeking out to look for Henry along the corridor, slipped down the back stairs and out into the garden, marching to the stables.

"I shall go for a ride, I want to see our woods again," Matilda said, whistling for the groom to bring around Shakespeare. She saw with a pang of misery that the carriage was nearly prepared. In less than ten minutes, Glavensborne would have lost both its Lord and Lady. "Then I suppose I shall go back to Sinclair Manor."

"You cannot, my lady!" Betty exclaimed. "You are Lady Linfield, this is your home!"

"If Henry can quit our marital home for his club in town then I can go to my parents," Matilda snapped carelessly. "Who is to stop me? He cares not. If he wants me to come back, he can come and get me, though I doubt he will."

Matilda swung herself up onto her horse and looked down at Betty's sad face.

"I shall send word when he has made arrangements," Matilda said, her voice cracking over the word. Then, before she could break apart entirely, she spurred Shakespeare and rode away down the road. She was in such a hurry that she did not notice the small, leather bound book that had fallen from her pocket at Betty's feet.



Betty stared down at her mistress' diary, picking it up slowly and worrying her lip with her teeth. She knew she should take the diary back inside, hide it in her mistress' drawer and act as if she had never seen it. Yet she also knew what the diary contained. If there was ever proof of why her lady had gone to the church that day, why she had intervened in her dear friend's first engagement, it would be found in the pages of the diary. Betty knew that her mistress loved Lord Linfield with her every breath. She suspected Lord Linfield felt the same. Yet if he would not hear Matilda's explanation from her own lips then perhaps he needed to hear it from somewhere else. Steeling her resolve, Betty quickly crossed to the carriage, opened the door, and placed the diary of Lady Linfield on the leather seat. Walking quickly back up to the house, Betty prayed that no one had seen her and that her small machinations would help her mistress find the happiness she deserved.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“*W*hen shall you return, my lord?” Mrs York asked, walking rapidly beside him as Henry strode out of the house to the carriage.

“I am unsure,” Henry snapped, wrenching open the door. “Not for a while.”

“I see, and what of Lady Linfield?” Mrs York asked pointedly. Henry’s heart clenched at her words. He wanted to go somewhere he would not hear Matilda’s name for a long time.

“Arrangements shall be made.” Henry refused to meet Mrs York’s eyes, not wanting to see the disappointment there. He was not naive enough to think that in the thirty minutes it had taken him to prepare for travel the servants weren’t completely aware of his fight with his wife. Mrs York would likely think he was running away from his troubles, she would expect him to stay and work on his marriage like a good husband. What none of them realised was that he and Matilda had never been good husband or wife to one another. They had been good friends, and now that their friendship was broken, there was nothing left.

“Goodbye, Mrs York,” he said, climbing into the carriage.

“Goodbye, my lord,” Mrs York said sadly, closing the door on him. Henry determinedly looked out of the window away from the house. He didn’t want to catch a glimpse of Matilda staring out a window and watching him go. He didn’t know if this was because he was afraid his rage would only grow, or afraid that he would force the carriage to stop and run back into her arms. For an hour, Henry thought of nothing but his rage. He watched the countryside fly by outside the window and tortured himself over and over again with the moment the woman, *Matilda*, had appeared in the church. How had he not

recognised her from her silhouette? He imagined that if he had just looked a bit closer he would have seen the gleam of her alabaster skin, or the glitter of her sapphire eyes. If only he had been paying a little more attention on that day, he would have noticed a stray dark curl, as black as a raven's wing, emerging from the hood. How had he not immediately thought of her when an unbelievably fast lady rider had been mentioned? How had he not remembered that the necklace was hers? The summer her father had gifted it to her, he had seen her wearing it over and over. Althea had loved it, admired it endlessly. She had even worn it the night of the ball when Althea first suggested their engagement! How had he not seen it all?

Groaning, he set his forehead against the carriage window, trying to blink back his desperate tears. *I loved her. I loved her and she betrayed me. The one person I thought would never turn on me was lying to me the whole time.* He had been a fool to even consider that marriage might work for him. In that moment, he bitterly regretted ever reconnecting with Matilda. Even if his marriage to Miss Danforth had been unhappy, at least it wouldn't have produced such gut-wrenching pain as this. He had married Matilda thinking he would have the best of both worlds; a marriage for prestige and a partner who accepted him as he was. Instead he had fallen in love with his best friend, and she had eviscerated his heart. Could anything have been worse?

Henry slumped back against the seat of the carriage in frustration, wishing he could shake this hideous feeling from his body. His hand suddenly rested against something firm. He looked under one of the small, velvet cushions and stared, mouth open at what he found.

"What the —" he whispered, holding up a distinctive cloth bound book. It was embossed with a familiar insignia — the Sinclair family crest. Underneath were the embossed gold letters: M. W.

Matilda Wynter.

For a second, Henry could not imagine how his wife's diary had ended up in the carriage. He pondered momentarily if he could have accidentally swept it up when he stormed out her bedroom that morning, but then he was distracted by one burning question: should he read it?

"Hardly honourable," he muttered to himself, tracing the lettering with his finger. Yet at the same time, he felt a flash of bitter

vindication. He had allowed himself to be truly vulnerable with her, he had borne his heart to her, admitted his feelings. Then he had been utterly broken by her. Who could blame him for breaking her trust in return? After all, she had turned out to be nothing like what he believed her to be. The sweet, unfailingly honest friend from his childhood had vanished, replaced by a cold, conniving manipulator. Who could blame him for trying to understand who this new woman was? He briefly flipped the pages through his fingers, testing his resolve. He saw flashes of names, of a reference to a man she loved, and that old suspicion that Matilda's heart did actually belong to someone else entirely rose up again. What if this was actually a record of the affair he had been so suspicious of? What if it showed that their evening together last night had actually been an orchestrated diversion away from her affair? Feeling a rush of jealousy and anger again, he opened the diary at the first page. Surprisingly, it was dated only at the start of this year. He realised that Matilda must indeed write frequently to have nearly filled the entire book by autumn. He hurriedly read the first words.

Father is putting his foot down. He wants me to marry this year. I have been putting it off so long, I don't know if I can do much more to divert his efforts. I can't tell him the truth, that I already have someone I love.

Here it was. Henry felt both crushing disappointment and furious vindication. At the start of the year, Matilda and he had not even been reacquainted, yet she had been in love. He was about to find out who truly had Matilda's heart. His own seemed to stop when he read the next words.

There is no one for me but Henry. Betty tells me I must move on, that I have not seen him for years, but I know it doesn't matter. I have as little choice in it as I do in the course of the stars. I lost my heart to Henry Linfield at twelve years old. I shall love him all my life long. No matter what happens.

Henry stared at the words on the paper in disbelief. His heart thundering, he flipped through the pages, searching for a reference for when she had changed her mind, when she had grown up and stopped loving him. Yet he never found one. *She loves me. She has always loved me. She wasn't lying.*

Yet he couldn't deny she had been the one in the church. She had betrayed him. What could she possibly say to defend herself? Why

would she suddenly turn on him and decide to humiliate him if she did indeed love him so much? Looking carefully at Matilda's scrawled dates in the top left of each page, he found the date his banns had been read at the church.

I think I went too far. I can feel it in my gut, just like the time I fell in the lake. I knew I was out of my depth, that I'd done something foolish, almost dangerous. I know in my heart that if Henry ever found out what I did today, he would hate me and that burns me up inside. I don't know if I can bear betraying him like this. But then I remember how he used to be when he was young, how carefree and joyful he was, and the idea of someone taking that joy away from him makes me feel enraged. I feel like I would destroy anyone who came between him and his happiness. He deserves so much more than a forced marriage to a girl he doesn't care for. He deserves the world! If I cannot be free, if I am not going to be able to follow my heart, then I promised myself I would make sure he could. I will hate myself forever for hurting him, and for hurting Althea and Medea. God in heaven forgive me for what I have done to them. I shall carry it my whole life, and I swear to God above I will do all I can to make it right for them. I never thought about what it would do to them, only Henry. Yet if all of this, if carrying this guilt and shame the rest of my life means he can be free, if it means he can be happy, then it will be worth it. I will love him as I have always done - from afar.

"Damnit, Tills," he whispered, realising that he was crying. A tear slipped from his cheek and blotted the ink of the page. He closed it quickly, placing his hand on the cover and leaning back, breathing deeply. In his mind, there were a swirl of memories coming back to him. Him and Matilda sitting in the treehouse, talking about his travels, both declaring they would never marry and instead be adventurous and happy. Him and Matilda fighting in the stream, splashing one another and Matilda's gown wet at the knees, her eyes sparking. Him and Matilda dancing at the Reading ball, her eyes dancing with light, and he and Matilda lying in the orchard, rolling in the grass and giggling. She had done it for him. She had done it because she loved him. At that moment, he realised he might have even done the same for her. Was there anything he wouldn't do for Matilda to make sure she was happy and safe? Nothing. *Because I love her*, he realised. No one had ever looked at him like she did. No one had ever made him laugh like she did. No one knew him, just as he was, exactly like she did. *I've loved her my whole life and never knew it.*

"Turn around!" Henry yelled, pounding on the carriage door, leaning out for the footman. "Turn around, I say!"

The coach came to a shuddering halt.

“Have you forgot something, my lord?” A voice called.

“Yes! Something vital!” Henry called back. *My wife!*

The ride back to Glavensborne seemed to take an agonisingly long time comparably. Henry was chomping at the bit, desperate to get there, to run up the stairs and pull his wife into his arms and beg her forgiveness. Before the horses had even stopped he had flung the door open, staggering a little in the gravel before running towards the doors. Surprisingly, Betty was the first one to fling open the door and come out to meet him.

“Oh, my lord, thank God you are back!” she cried.

“Where is my wife?” Henry demanded.

“She went riding, my lord, in a terrible state.” Betty twisted her fingers in worry. Henry’s heart dropped. Matilda was a strong rider but even so, he felt himself panic. What if something should happen to her and the last thing he had said was cruel?

“Where did she go? I must follow her.”

“Of course, my lord, she said she wanted to go back to ‘our woods,’ but she wasn’t specific about which ones.” Betty looked at him desperately. “She mentioned Sinclair Manor too. Could you know where she was going?”

Henry allowed himself a small smile of relief and then jumped back in the carriage.

“Don’t worry, I know exactly where she is going.”



Matilda lay on the floor of the treehouse, staring up at the turning leaves. It had only been a few weeks since she and Henry had last been here. Then, at the very end of summer, the leaves had still held all of their fresh green hue. Now they were turning orange, the edges beginning to die and curl. So much had changed. Back then Henry had

no idea of her feelings yet at least he was still her friend. Now he was her husband, but he hated her. Matilda snorted wryly to herself. Now she was back exactly where she started, riding away from her problems, alone in the woods with just Shakespeare for company. She could just imagine her father's face when she explained that her husband of less than a month had left her.

"Oh Shakespeare," she moaned, flopping her arm over her face. "They were all right. I'm an eccentric fool. I should have just married his viscount and have done with it."

"Oh, do you think he would take you?"

Matilda startled up, whacking her elbow against the firm bark of the tree.

"Damn!" she hissed, turning over to stare over the edge the treehouse, her heart thumping. "Oh, God."

Henry was standing in the grass below her. He was petting Shakespeare, in a slightly absent way, his hair ruffled and his chest heaving. He must have run down from the road.

"Language," Henry said lightly, his fingers tangling in Shakespeare's mane.

"What are you doing here?" She asked blankly.

"Asking if you think the viscount would take you," Henry said.

Matilda was astonished by his light, conversational tone but she had no idea how to handle it so simply answered his question.

"No, I would think not," Matilda said slowly, "based on the previous... attachment."

"Ah, yes. You are married to me." Henry nodded.

"Am I?" Matilda blurted out. "Still?"

Henry looked up at her, tilting his head quizzically, his hand still on Shakespeare's mane.

“Can I come up?” he asked, gesturing to the ladder.

Matilda nodded dumbly, shifting herself away from the ledge so she could put as much distance between her and Henry as possible and rubbing her sore elbow. He clambered up, shedding his coat as he did and rolling up his cuffs. He glanced at her.

“Your arm hurts?”

“Yes, I knocked it on the tree and...” Matilda stammered, losing her voice completely as Henry calmly took hold of her arms, gently massaging her elbow. Matilda held her breath. There was silence between them except for the rustling of the leaves in the trees and the soft sound of Shakespeare grazing beneath them. Finally, Matilda could bear it no longer. She pulled her arm away.

“Why are you here?” she blurted out.

“To see you,” Henry answered simply. He leaned back against the tree trunk, patting the spot on his coat beside him. Matilda stared at him, uncomprehending, until he jerked his head towards her, and she reluctantly shuffled over, leaning against the tree, too. She closed her eyes, breathing out slowly. She didn’t know why Henry was here. The only reason she could think was that he had calmed down a little and now wanted to discuss the dissolution of the marriage.

“I always loved it here,” Henry said quietly. “It was simpler then, wasn’t it? Our friendship, it was so pure. We made each other laugh, we were each other’s confidantes. I think the happiest times of my life were here, with you.”

Matilda felt a lump in her throat. Tears pricked behind her eyes, but she refused to cry. Henry was reminiscing, reminding her of the good times they had together. Perhaps Henry wanted them to retain some semblance of their friendship, at least between their families. She would do it for him, she knew already, even if it broke her in half. She could refuse him nothing, especially now he knew about her betrayal. She also knew that she was still his entirely.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, keeping her eyes squeezed shut.

She knew it would be nothing more than empty words to him, but she felt the urge to say it. She had to. Even if he never believed her, she

couldn't help it.

"I never meant to hurt any of you," she continued, her words barely more than a breath, feeling like in apologising, she was lancing a wound she had let fester for weeks. "I only wanted you to have the future you deserve, Henry. You deserve everything. You deserve..." her voice choked on the words. "Much more than me."

He didn't say anything. She hadn't expected him to, but it felt good to have said it. Like taking a cool sip of water when parched. At least now she could move forward knowing she had been heard. She expected nothing from him, so she almost jumped out of her skin when she felt him take her hand. Her breath caught in her chest and she held her breath. Then she felt his thumb making small, gentle circles on the back of her hand. She opened her eyes slowly to stare at him. Henry had his head tilted back against the tree, his eyes closed in relaxation. He didn't look at her. Instead he just sighed.

"My heart belongs to you too, Tills," he said.

Matilda couldn't stop tears slipping down her cheeks. She took a shuddering breath.

"What?" she whispered.

"You heard me." He opened his eyes and looked at her, smiling softly.

"Why?" Matilda whispered, feeling her whole body trembling.

"Because of this." Henry reached in his coat pocket and pulled out her diary. Matilda took a sharp breath in when she saw it. She quickly glanced between Henry and the book, discerning from the slight flush in his cheeks that he had indeed read it. Her heart sank. She felt a mix of furious sadness with a sense of betrayal. However, she also knew that she wasn't in any position to make that point. They had betrayed each other. She took a deep breath.

"I would have thought that it would make you hate me more," she said levelly, trying not to show her emotions.

"I'm sorry, I know it was a violation of privacy." Henry squeezed her hand gently, "but for what it's worth, I think it saved our marriage."

Matilda's heart flip-flopped at his words.

"Oh?" she managed to croak out.

"I didn't realise, Tills, you must forgive me, I didn't know until I saw it written down in black and white." He shook his head and then smiled ruefully. "It wasn't until I saw your words that I truly understood."

"Understood what?" Matilda breathed.

"That I've loved you all this time." Henry reached forward and twisted his finger around one of her dark curls. "I loved the little girl who was my friend, I wanted to protect her, just like you protected me. I loved the young woman who was my companion, I just didn't realise it. When I met you again at the Reading ball, I wanted you as a woman, but now I know the truth."

He leaned closer, his lips a breath away from hers.

"What?" Matilda whispered.

"That our love is more than a courtship, more than a dance or an engagement. Our marriage is just the final step in our friendship, my love, the next, wonderful step."

Matilda took a shuddering breath, trying to stop herself from bursting into joyous tears all over him.

"You really mean that?" she whispered, "you forgive me?"

"More than that, Tills," he murmured, his hand threading up into her loose hair. "I love you."

Their lips met gently, almost hesitantly, and for Matilda it was a golden moment that she wished she could preserve in glass and resin. The two of them, kissing in the spot that she had so often imagined kissing him in. Then it quickly became ravenous. Henry's hand moved from holding her hand to her waist, and Matilda instantly responded in kind. She tugged him towards her by his lapels and Henry gasped, looking down at her with those leafy, emerald eyes.

"I love you too, Henry," she gasped, her heart soaring with the relief

of finally saying the words. "I love you so much."

"God." Henry rubbed his forehead against hers. "I wish I could ask you to marry me all over again, Tills. I wish I could ask you to be mine and mean it this time. I want you to be mine."

"I am yours." Matilda pulled him closer, knowing what they both needed right now, feeling the urgency of it in her blood. "I am your wife, Henry. Take me now. Claim me."

"God, Tills!" Henry gasped, pushing her back on the old floorboards, his knee parting her legs and their mouths met in a hungry frenzy. They both knew what they wanted, what they needed from one another. Her fingers fumbled at his breeches whilst his rucked up her skirts, fingers swiftly dipping under her shift. With unerring accuracy, his thumb swirled the spot that gave her most pleasure and Matilda gasped.

"Henry," she whispered. "I love you. I love when you do this."

"I know, sweetheart, I know," Henry grunted, increasing his pressure and biting her lip. "I can feel it."

"I want to feel you." Matilda bucked her hips against his hand, jolting his finger to slip at her entrance. They both gasped.

"I am yours to command, wife."

Henry slipped his finger inside her with a fluttering motion that had Matilda tipping her head back and gazing up at the red and gold leaves. In the sunshine, they looked magical.

"You're mine," Henry gasped above her, "you're mine, Tills, I love you."

"I love you too." Matilda jerked herself up, desperate for more. "Let me have you, too."

She pushed him back against the tree trunk into a sitting position and quickly straddled him. Henry urgently released himself from his breeches and aligned their bodies and soon, he was filling her, his hands under shift grasping her hips tightly.

“Take me, love,” he grunted, burrowing his head in her neck. “I’m yours.”

Matilda tipped her hips, grinding against him helplessly, driven on by the fast, unravelling heat inside her. As she did, she could feel the beginning of autumn raindrops falling around them, dropping on the leaves and bark and forest floor, the deep scent of the woods rising up to meet them, blending in with the smell of their sweat and desire. It was the sweetest thing and drove her on, gasping and cursing and biting Henry’s neck until finally, she felt him clench against her, crying out her name.

“Matilda!” he gasped, his head falling back against the damp bark. “I love you!”

It was enough. It was too much. It was everything. In a moment, white hot pleasure flooded her body, reducing her to mere senses: the salty taste of Henry’s skin. The scent of wet leaves. The dampness of her thighs. The sound of raindrops falling. It was perfect.

“I waited for this for so long,” Matilda murmured, kissing his drowsy eyelids and feeling them flutter against her lips. “I have loved you so long, my love.”

“Was it worth it?” Henry joked lightly, opening his eye a crack. Matilda laughed, kissing him soundly on the mouth.

“Every second, husband.” She smiled. Henry smiled too, and pulled her close, letting her head rest against his neck. She let out a deep, cleansing breath. This was what it felt like to be home.

“Well, however long it took to get here.” Henry sighed. “I’m just glad we made it. There is nowhere else I want to be.”

Epilogue

Henry looked around the grand ballroom of Sinclair Manor, smiling at the swell of guests chattering and dancing and generally enjoying the first ever Lady Linfield ball. Everything had gone exactly as Matilda had been planning for the last three months, often spending days holed up with her mother and the Sinclair housekeeper, making extensive notes on the exact shade of rose and the perfect recipe for white soup.

"This is what ladies do," Ralph had said, shaking his head and pouring Henry a whisky as they waited for their wives to pay them attention. "This is how they contribute and support the great names and houses. They are adorning our hard work. Never underestimate it, but if you value your sanity, do not get involved."

Henry had been happy to leave it all in the hands of his dear wife and mother-in-law, finding that he enjoyed spending time with Ralph and Barty. Bartholomew was a cricket fiend, and never tired of dragging his new big brother out for a game, and Ralph was surprisingly easy to talk to. Henry had managed to get over how intimidated he felt when speaking with the Duke, even calling him by his first name. The two families had naturally begun to split their time between Glavensborne and Sinclair Manor, Matilda happily hosting her mother for days of gardening and sewing, her little brother for long rides over the south downs and Henry beginning to lead shooting parties for Ralph and their other acquaintances. He had been overjoyed when Matilda had insisted on adding his sister's to their family gatherings and activities. Even Owen's help had been enlisted to help Henry build a tree house for Barty, even though Henry knew Matilda secretly wanted to use it as a little love nest for the two of them. He had loved watching Owen and Althea bicker about the right height, Barty and Medea collecting pinecones and his wife, smiling up at him, full of joy to be surrounded by love. Henry had never known that family life could be like this -- that the halls of his home could ring with the laughter and cheer of people who were easy and light with one another. It was a surprise for

his sister's too, who, like him, had endured their parents' mutual unhappiness.

"You are all so happy," Medea had whispered, the first time she had seen Henry, Matilda and the rest of the Wynter family laughing and joking together at the dinner table. Her little eyes had widened with hope and excitement. "You smile all the time. Is it always like this?"

"Most days." Henry smiled at his sister and then winked at his wife, who was watching out of the corner of her eye. "Unless Matilda is in a *very* bad mood."

"My lord, I hope you are not spreading false rumours about me," Matilda had said, her voice full of false seriousness but her eyes sparkling with wit.

"Would never dream of it, my darling." Henry grinned, reaching across the table to squeeze his wife's hand. "Unless the rumour is that you are the most perfect wife a man could ask for."

Althea had watched him carefully, a soft smile on her lips but curiosity in her eyes. Henry knew she had questions about it, about how he had managed to find such happiness in his partner, but as yet, she hadn't quite had the courage to bring it up. Matilda had advised him to wait. Althea needed to take her time. He wondered if it would come up this evening at the ball. Thinking of his sister, he glanced around to look for her. Matilda had plans to introduce his sister to a friendly viscount this evening, but when Henry caught sight of Althea she was standing in a corner, her golden hair glinting, and her brown eyebrows furrowed as she bickered with Owen. Henry smirked into his wine glass and shook his head. Those two were impossible!

"Are they fighting again?"

Henry turned and saw his wife. The sight of her took his breath away. She was wearing the most stunning gown in cornflower blue, with climbing lace blue flowers rising up from the hem, flecked with silver thread. Her skin was glowing softly in the gentle light of the ballroom, her dark curls piled up on top of her head, revealing the long, pale curve of her wonderful neck. He felt such a deep twinge of longing that it was all he could do not to pull her into his arms and place a kiss on her collarbone. Instead, he settled for kissing her hand, letting his lips rub across her knuckles. He was rewarded with the gentle

flush of her cheeks as she stepped up beside him, indicating her own arousal. It was a wonderful, secret pleasure, knowing he could do this to her. It was an exquisite pain, waiting and longing for her all night, eventually falling together in bed later, eager, and desperate. Henry swallowed heavily just thinking about it, and forced himself to look away from the perfect, pale slope of his wife's breasts. How pleasant it was that she could still distract him like this.

"That they are." Henry laughed shortly. "Has she met your viscount yet? Maybe that would distract her?"

"I believe she has met him and agreed to at least one dance, but she and Owen could bicker over the colour of the sky, I believe." Matilda shook her head, smiling fondly. "I do hope the need for her to prove him wrong doesn't outweigh her desire to impress the viscount."

At that moment, Althea threw up her hands and marched over towards them, blowing out her cheeks.

"He is infuriating!" she exclaimed, fanning herself quickly. "I don't know why he is your friend, Henry, he has not a sensible thought in his head!"

"Yet you talk to him so often," Henry pointed out, and was surprised to see Althea blush slightly.

"You shall dance with the viscount?" Matilda said, diverting her attention.

"Yes, for the first." Althea bit her lip. "He seems quite pleasant, but how should I know if he is the one?"

"Only you can know that," Matilda answered softly. Althea shook her head, as if to say that the answer was too vague and turned expectantly to Henry. Henry sighed, tilting his head to one side as he thought to put it into words.

"Well, I suppose it is simple." He looked at Matilda with a slow smile, "if he feels like your best friend, that you could not live without him then he is the one."

"Henry," Matilda whispered quietly, slipping her hand into his discreetly behind his back, her eyes telling him how much she wanted

to touch him more. Althea looked between the two of them like they were the most infuriating people in the world.

“You two are no help,” she muttered, flouncing off. Henry wasn’t surprised to see that Owen quickly crossed her path, handing her a glass and delivering an acerbic witticism that had her frowning. Henry chortled to himself.

“I find myself suddenly wishing that there were no people in this ballroom,” Matilda whispered quietly, her thumb softly tracing circles on the back of his hand, making him shiver.

“Or that perhaps we were at home? In bed?” Henry teased, his eyebrows raised.

“That might do,” Matilda murmured, her blue eyes lingering on his lips in a way that made him want to kiss her. “Or anywhere in the world where it could just be the two of us.”

“Well, I have an idea about that,” Henry responded softly, excitement blooming in his chest as he thought of the surprise he had for his wife.

“Oh? Pray tell,” Matilda teased, squeezing his hand.

Henry kissed their joined hands tenderly and then let go, reaching inside his jacket pocket to pull out an old piece of paper, yellowing and fading around the edges.

“Here.” Henry handed it to his wife, watching as she slowly unravelled it.

She took a sharp breath in. “Is this from....is this the Forum in Rome?”

“Yes, a poor facsimile by my own hand, I must say.” Henry smiled, rocking back on his heels. “You asked me to draw it, do you recall? When we were children? You made me promise to bring it to you at your first ball.”

His wife stared at the crude sketch, made by his seventeen-year-old hand in the Italian sunshine. He could tell her emotions were building, noticed the tell-tale sheen on her sapphire blue eyes. He knew she had waited for this gift for many years. It gave him joy to finally be able to

give her everything she desired.

“Well, you are a little late,” she teased, her voice trembling a little with emotion.

“I am, but I come bearing another gift to make up for it.” Henry grinned. “Turn it over.”

Matilda did so, her eyes widening at the words scrawled on the back by Henry, just that very evening: *Dear wife, will you go adventuring with me?*

“Really?” Matilda whispered, staring up at him with her beautiful mouth slightly open.

“Yes, my darling. I thought we might start in France, then travel through Spain, Italy, find a little spot for you to try some Greek wine...a six-month tour should be enough ...”

“Oh Henry!”

She seemed to forget the guests around them entirely, flinging her arms around his neck. Henry laughed, holding his wife close, not caring about the laughs and smiles around him. Her pleasure was his pleasure. There was no greater joy for him than making Matilda Linfield smile. He would spend the rest of his life doing it and find it no hardship.

“Are you happy, my love?” he asked softly, breathing in the delicate, jasmine scent of her hair. Matilda pulled away, looking up into Henry’s face with happy tears in her eyes.

“I am happier than I have ever been.” She smiled.

“Good.” Henry laughed, reaching down to press a quick, unforeseen kiss to her plump lips, his heart full of joy. “Me too.”

The End?

Extended Epilogue

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Afterword

Thank you for reading my novel, **A Lie to Lay with the Lord**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write a review HERE](#)?

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

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Wicked and Wanton in London

Book#1

A Bet to Wed the Duke



Book#2 (this book)

A Lie to Lay with the Lord

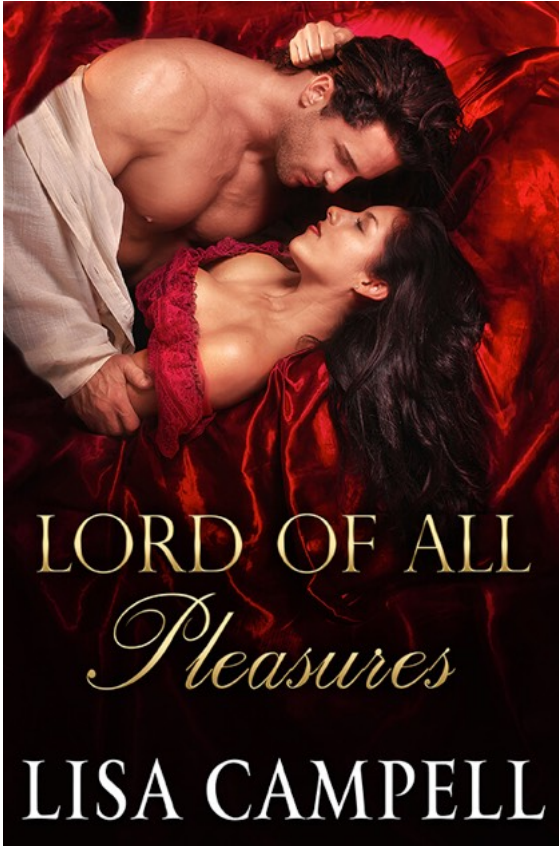
Do you want more Romance?

If you're a true fan of the Scottish romance genre, here are the first chapters of my previous best selling story, and it's called: **Lord of All Pleasures**

Beatrice is destined to climb the social ladder and have a secure life next to a nobleman. Her brother, the notorious *Lucifer of London* will ensure that. Yet, her heart belongs to a man she cannot have. A man her brother would never approve of as her match. She might find her happiness in the fires of hell, but paradise is yet far to reach. And the final choice won't be hers...



Lord of All Pleasures



Chapter One

“You look beautiful, Beatrice!”

“Thank you, Lydia,” Beatrice smiled politely at the Marquess of Loudwater’s eldest daughter, a society woman for whom Beatrice had no love at all. “So do you.”

“Thank you,”

As always, the other woman was pleased with the compliment, and pressed her hands down against her silvery silk gown. Beatrice noted that Lydia’s gown was the height of fashion, but that did not stop the other woman from looking at Beatrice’s gold satin and white lace gown with tremendous envy.

“What an exquisite fabric!” Lydia said, fluttering her huge ostrich fan with glittering eyes. “Did you choose it yourself?”

“No,” Beatrice almost rolled her eyes in frustration, groaning internally. She found this kind of conversation absolutely dire, and yet she had lost count of the amount of them she had endured with ladies like this at various society events.

“Mrs. Klane did,” Beatrice added, looking pointedly at her sister-in-law, Anna, who was barely paying attention to the conversation, her eyes wandering around the room with excitement. Unlike Beatrice, who was yet to meet a ball she actually enjoyed, Anna had been completely starved of balls for the last year and half since she had had given birth to her son, Caleb. This was Anna’s first outing into society since the birth and she was eager to dance with her husband, Silas, who stood nearby, chatting with business associates. Beatrice was happy for her sister’s happiness, but just wished she didn’t have to endure a ball for it to come about.

“Anna?” Beatrice prompted.

“Oh, yes,” Anna glanced at Lydia and then reached out a gloved hand to stroke the sleeve of Beatrice’s dress. “I found it in London. Doesn’t it flatter Beatrice’s skin so beautifully?”

“Completely!” Lydia gushed. “Such a perfect find, Mrs. Klane! You must give me the name of your dressmaker.”

Beatrice tried not to snort derisively as Lydia’s sycophantic remarks to Anna. At Beatrice’s first ball, Lydia had revealed her true colours as a terrible gossip and a manipulator by trying her hand at putting Beatrice down in front of Anna, and Anna had firmly put the fear of God into the young heiress. Now Lydia was sugary sweet towards them all. Beatrice couldn’t stand the falseness of it all, and how could she ever warm to a girl who had taken such delight in her discomfort at their first meeting?

Beatrice was distracted by her thoughts at that moment as a fair-headed young man with a large forehead approached Lydia.

“Lady Lydia, might I claim your hand for the first dance?”

“Oh, how flattering, Baron Clare, but I am unavailable for this set,” Lydia simpered, blushing with pride to be able to turn the young man down. She had her sights set higher, and everyone knew it. At the moment, Lydia’s gaze continually fluttered over to the Earl of Essex.

“But perhaps...my friend? Miss Klane?”

Beatrice saw the way the young baron’s eyebrows raised at her name. Once upon a time this would have been Lydia’s way of needling her, to highlight Beatrice’s comparatively low status beside her own, but since the Klane family had risen so high in society it was a different matter. Now, Beatrice knew that the young man would be considering her fortune, her brother’s desirable business connections, and her sister-in-law’s impressive social influence when he looked her up and down.

“I would be most happy to,” Baron Clare bowed before her. “If you are available, Miss Klane?”

“Sadly she is not,” Anna stepped in, smiling gently at the Baron.

Beatrice knew from experience that Anna considered the first dance of the night an indicator of intent. She would never allow Beatrice to stand up with a callow young baron that she and Silas were not sure of. With Silas's reputation and history, they were very careful about who they entertained as possible suitors for Anna. Also, Anna would not permit Beatrice to take a partner who Lydia had rejected, simply out of spite.

"But thank you, Baron Clare," Anna turned to Lydia, "and thank you, Lady Lydia, for being so considerate, but we would not want to take away from your opportunities. Do not be held back from a turn with the Baron on our account."

"Of course," Lydia smiled, clearly trying not to look put out that Anna had turned a situation where Beatrice was forced to take her cast offs into a situation where Lydia was cornered into doing the same. "I should be delighted, Baron Clare."

He smiled, clearly relieved not to be coming away empty handed, and took Lydia's hand. Lydia accepted it, but managed to glare some daggers over her shoulder at Anna as they walked away. Anna simply smiled sweetly and waved. Beatrice knew that her sister might look all sweetness and innocence, but she never forgot those who had wronged her family.

Beatrice noticed the way the assembled ladies and gentlemen watched the pair move towards the dance floor with interest. Every ball was the same. Beatrice sometimes felt as if she was the entertainment at these events, as though her only reason for being there was so the married ladies could provide commentary on who might be setting their sights at her this evening.

"He is a nice boy," Anna sighed, fluttering her fan in front of her mouth to hide her words. "But though he is handsome and sweet, Silas tells me he has a gambling problem."

Beatrice nodded, trusting Anna's word. If anyone knew the financial status of every man in the city, it was her brother.

"You have an alternate in mind?" Beatrice asked, knowing Anna never attended a ball without a plan of how to use the occasion to advance her sister's position in society.

“Indeed,” Anna smiled. “A viscount, no less.”

Beatrice wished she could feel more excited, but the notion of dancing with another pampered gentleman of the Ton only filled her with dread. Anna had begun a conversation with Lydia’s mother about eligible gentlemen, and just the thought of it made Beatrice’s blood run cold. She feigned interest, nodding to imply she was listening, but actually let her mind wander.

To distract herself, Beatrice looked around the room. Unconsciously, her eyes immediately sought out her brother. He was talking quietly with a small group of gentlemen with an ease that she knew he would never have been able to achieve before he was married. Anna had changed him in all the best ways. Still, their courtship had not been without its difficulties. Even now, nearly two years after it had happened, Beatrice felt a tightness in her stomach when she recalled the dreadful trauma of Anna’s kidnap at the hands of one of Silas’ old business partners.

Even though both Anna and Silas had recovered and moved on, Beatrice had struggled. In crowds like this, she found herself repeatedly seeking out the faces of those she loved, checking they were still here and well. Anna, Silas, and Silas’s right-hand man, Giovanni. It was how she reassured herself nothing bad would happen.

Across the crowded sea of gentleman in fine coats and ladies in soft silks and floating organza, through the whirling couples dancing in the centre of the wide polished floor, Beatrice saw her brother standing off to the side, as he often was at social events, near the doorway. Silas caught her gaze and jerked his head for her to join him.

“Excuse me, ladies,” Beatrice said, dropping into a curtsy. She ignored Anna’s raised eyebrows at being left alone with Lydia, and walked to join Silas on the edge of his group.

“Are you well?” Silas asked quietly, linking her arm with his.

“I am,” Beatrice felt herself relaxing in her brother’s close presence. The warmth of his body next to hers gave her energy and strength.

“Fending off the suitors?” Silas nodded at the young Baron Clare as he

stood talking quietly with Lydia by the windows. “Must I challenge that young rogue to a duel?”

“No!” Beatrice laughed softly, enjoying her brother’s ever predictable over-protectiveness. When everything in her current world was designed to remind her that she was a lady, soon to be a wife, she enjoyed this aspect of their relationship that still allowed her to feel like a young girl. “He was perfectly nice, but Anna sent him on his way. She has plans to introduce me to the—”

“—Viscount Milton, I remember,” Silas interrupted, nodding. “He’d be a good match for you.”

“I have not met him yet,” Beatrice quietly reminded him. It was a matter of small tension between the two siblings. Silas had only seen a picture of Anna before accepting her as a bride, and they’d only met once prior to their wedding. Silas sometimes forgot how rarefied their match was—that a couple brought together under the strangest of circumstances had found the deepest love and appreciation for one another.

“You will tonight,” Silas said diffidently, as if it were nothing to be worried about.

“I shall not marry a man I barely know, Silas,” Beatrice reminded him softly, trying not to get irritated.

“No one suggests you should,” he said in a placating tone, but Beatrice knew he didn’t really understand. He thought the way forward was to find a man she could imagine being comfortable with, a man she could consider knowing intimately. He never considered that the man might already be in her life.

“Where is Gio?” Beatrice asked.

“Over there,” Silas smiled ruefully as he looked at his right-hand man and best friend, gesturing to the other corner of the room. Beatrice’s stomach contracted slightly as she looked at Giovanni Amante, the man that she had secretly lusted after since her adolescence.

“It seems that the ladies here tonight are quite taken with his Italian charms,” Silas shook his head, laughing quietly. “It’s like Anna always says: Giovanni is a charmer!”

“Indeed,” Beatrice swallowed hard, trying not sound sour as she watched Giovanni laugh with a group of ladies simpering around him. As Silas’s bodyguard and right-hand man, he often had to blend in well with high society even though both he and Silas had grown up on the streets of London and Venice, respectively.

Beatrice had been hidden from most of their exploits throughout her childhood as they moved around the continent, running from their past. Silas was nine years her senior, and by the time Giovanni came into their lives Silas was twenty years old and had already accumulated a fearsome reputation. Giovanni was a seventeen-year-old bare-knuckle boxer who Silas had met when they were staying Lyon. Beatrice was only eleven at the time, but she remembered Silas bringing Giovanni home. She had stared at him, this dark, swarthy boy with his broad shoulders, sweet, heart-shaped face, chestnut brown hair and leafy green eyes. Those eyes had been full of hurt and anger and ambition.

“*Ciao*,” he had said, smiling at her with such softness and sweetness, before winking roguishly. “I’m Giovanni. What’s your name, *bella*?”

She had been speechless, her dark eyes round as saucers as she gaped like a fish up at this young Italian who made butterflies take root inside her for the first time. He had been the most beautiful boy she had ever seen and he had only become more handsome as he had grown into a man. At twenty-seven, his soft jaw line had grown chiselled and strong, his soft hair had darkened and his eyes had lost some of their openness, becoming more seductive for the secrets they held. He had also kept that same Italian magnetism; throughout her adolescence Beatrice had been left in a giggling mess by those beguiling winks and smiles that had only become more intense and smooth over time. Tonight, that side of Giovanni was out in full force.

Clearly, Beatrice wasn’t the only one who found him beautiful. She watched, irritated, as the ladies around him laughed giddily, testing out Italian phrases under his instruction. It was a favourite tactic of his to captivate the ladies, one he had grown up practising on Beatrice. She’d blushed and stammered whilst his sensual lips sounded out the Italian words for “good morning.” She knew this routine well. Her brother was right, Giovanni had always been charming, but it was only when he had truly become a man that his flirtatiousness had begun to irritate her. Just as Beatrice was now firmly a debutante—a flower of society—Giovanni had cemented himself in the role of ladies man. She couldn’t help it—his teasing ways made her envious of the

women who caught the twinkle in his eye, the slow rise of his exotic smile. Beatrice drank a little wine and turned away, noticing that Anna had slipped away from Lydia's mother.

"Goodness, that woman has plans for her daughter!" Anna huffed, flapping her crimson fan. It was a perfect match for her crimson dress with golden beading. Silas had bought it for her as a special gift for her first ball. Silas looked at his wife with a radiant smile, the kind of smile Beatrice had rarely seen in their childhood together.

"Did you not enjoy Lady Loudwater's company?" Silas laughed, slipping his arm around his wife's waist with an ease that made Beatrice's heart ache. How she yearned for that same ease with her future partner.

Anna shook her head, golden curls shining. "What are we speaking of?"

"We're enjoying Giovanni's performance," Silas smiled, nodding towards his friend.

"Oh?" Anna slipped away from her husband's side to link arms with Beatrice. She was instantly comforted by her sister-in-law's strong, kind presence by her side, even if looking at Giovanni flirt was uncomfortable for her. She could see him now, brazenly allowing a blonde lady with silky hair to lay her hand on his arm with an arresting smile that made Beatrice feel like she had been punched in the gut.

"Are you alright, dear?" Anna asked, squeezing her arm. "You look a little flushed."

"I am well," Beatrice worried that her thoughts of Giovanni were beginning to show in her own face. Self-consciously she fluttered her white feather fan that was trimmed with gold leaf.

"Here he comes," Silas grinned into his cup. "He looks a little flushed too, I must say."

Beatrice jerked her head up in time to see Giovanni walking towards them, striding easily across the ballroom as if he were a duke, and not some Italian orphan picked up on the streets. He smiled as he approached them, puffing out his cheeks slightly and shaking his

head.

"There's a lot of call for the Italian parlour tricks tonight!" Giovanni laughed, joining them easily. Beatrice felt the subtle shift in their little unit of four as they stood together—now she felt safe, complete. All the people she cared most for were with her and safe. That was all that mattered to her.

"It's always a winner, pulling out the Italian," Silas said sarcastically, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. "Especially with ladies."

"Indeed," Giovanni laughed, toasting Silas with his own glass.

"You must not be struggling for dance partners tonight," Anna said, smiling playfully at Giovanni.

"Sadly, no," Giovanni shook his head, that handsome smile breaking over his face. "But I have managed to save a dance for Beatrice."

Beatrice flushed and felt a flare of desire at the idea of dancing with Giovanni. She tried to look as if it was a matter of complete indifference to her.

"Of course, at least until my designated partner appears. Is it alright, Anna?"

Beatrice didn't want to seem too eager, nor did she want to step on Anna's plans.

"Yes, of course. We shall join you." Anna turned to her husband, smiling. "Shall we all dance together, my dear?"

"I would enjoy that." Silas smiled fondly at his wife. "It has been a while."

Beatrice half wished that it was not a quartet dance as they took their places in a square, smiling at one another. She wondered how it would feel to dance a more intimate partner dance with Giovanni. He grinned at her playfully as they bowed and curtsied to one another, and Beatrice felt a thrilling mix of annoyance and excitement.

"So who is your lucky partner for this evening, *bella*?"

Beatrice's mind snagged a little on the familiar nickname from her childhood and felt herself blush. Giovanni could always be relied on to make her feel special, though tonight she resented it a little.

"Viscount Milton," Beatrice said, trying to keep her voice light. "You'll not be short for partners either, I imagine."

"I imagine not," Giovanni laughed, the carefree sound making Beatrice smile. "Though none of them will be as delightful of you, Beatrice."

Beatrice felt Giovanni squeeze her hand softly before letting it go, turning around to face Anna as Beatrice faced Silas. Beatrice wondered if she had imagined it.

"Are you well?" Silas asked. "You look flushed again."

"I'm fine," Beatrice snapped, trying not to draw attention to how flustered and strange Giovanni's words and touch made her. Luckily, she didn't need to speak to him for the rest of the dance, only coming back to stand opposite him as the dance ended. Still, it was as if his touch was burned into her hand. She noticed the way Giovanni was already winking at a girl standing nearby. Did he ever stop flirting? Before Beatrice could open her mouth to tell him to stop gawping like a youth, Anna had grabbed her arm.

"The viscount!" Anna hissed, her eyes darting through the clapping dancers. Beatrice turned to watch him approach. So did Giovanni.

"Ah, the viscount," Giovanni spoke softly. His smile was broad but there was hesitation behind his eyes. He was staring at the incoming viscount with considerable suspicion—she knew that Giovanni was always cautious when new people were admitted into their close circle. For a moment, she thought she saw a slightly possessive glance flit across his face and her stomach lurched, but then it was gone. Just like that brief squeeze of the hand she thought she'd imagined, it was over, and he was backing away, eyes already fixed on that blonde woman. Maybe he did not care whom she danced with, or whom she married, especially with so many elegant ladies to simper over him. The thought made Beatrice feel hollow inside.

"Viscount Milton, allow me to introduce my sister, Miss Beatrice Klane," Anna was saying, pulling Beatrice's eyes away from the dark

back of Giovanni's head.

"I am charmed to make your acquaintance," Lord Milton bowed low before Beatrice, with all the elegance of a man with incredibly high breeding.

"As am I," Beatrice replied, curtsying respectfully. She recalled a time when she had first come out into society and the idea of curtsying before a viscount would have filled her with dread and uncertainty. Now it was second nature. She had lost count of the many curtsies, introductions, and first dances she had undertaken since coming out. They all blurred into one. The faces of eligible men, young and old, blending together, none of them shining so brightly as Giovanni's. Yet Lord Milton was especially handsome.

He was the physical opposite of Giovanni—tall and willowy, with a soft, gentlemanly face, pale Saxon skin and reddish-golden hair. His eyes were pale blue but they twinkled with generous humour, and his smile was soft and seductive. Beatrice could see why Anna had selected him as a potential suitor.

"Might I have this dance, Miss Klane?" The Viscount asked.

Out of the corner of her eye, Beatrice could see Giovanni laughing with some gentlemen. A rather stunning red-headed woman had joined the group and was looking at him in fascination. Beatrice swallowed her envy and smiled at Lord Milton.

"I should like that," she said, slipping her hand into his elbow and stepping towards the dance floor.

Chapter Two

“Who is that gentleman?” Giovanni asked Silas quietly, carefully watching Beatrice and Anna from afar. Beatrice was glowing. Beatrice was blessed with creamy, pale skin, but dark hair and eyes that were set off deliciously against the frosty white and warm gold of her gown. Giovanni knew it was a gown designed to make her look both alluring and tempting—Anna had chosen it so that Beatrice would look as appealing as possible to potential suitors, and it was clearly working. Wherever Giovanni looked around the room, gentlemen’s eyes were darting over towards Silas Klane’s sister as she smiled and laughed with her equally beautiful sister-in-law and the gentleman standing with her.

“Viscount Milton,” Silas answered, sipping his wine and watching his wife coordinate an introduction.

“What sort of man is he?” Giovanni asked, assessing the viscount carefully. To Giovanni, he looked like every other well-bred society gentleman—if perhaps particularly good looking—but Giovanni could see the way Beatrice smiled at him generously. It lit a flame of jealousy inside him. He wished he could look away, but she was too delightful to deny himself.

“A good man, by all reports,” Silas said. “Anna has done some careful research into his family, and she knows his mother relatively well.”

“And Mrs. Klane thinks he would be a good match for Beatrice?” Giovanni asked, trying not to sound awkward. He had known Beatrice for ten years, had been like another brother to her, but he had never really spoken to Silas about her prospects. No matter how close he and Silas were, no matter that Giovanni loved Silas as his own blood, the intricacies and politics of Beatrice’s marriage was something Giovanni had never been included in.

“He is wealthy, he has a proud lineage and title, he is young with a good reputation, no debts or vices to speak of,” Silas listed, each point making Giovanni feel resentful towards this dashing young suitor. “He would make a good husband for my sister.”

“If she likes him,” Giovanni added quietly, instantly regretting it. Silas had always been focused on how important it was for Beatrice’s future for her to marry a man of wealth, but sometimes he could be dismissive of Beatrice’s desire to marry a man she liked.

“Yes, of course,” Silas nodded. “But he is very well-liked. There is no reason why she shouldn’t.”

Giovanni loved his friend, would die in his service and fight his battles for him, but he couldn’t help but sometimes feel frustrated by his obsession with social standing. Giovanni understood, of course, that Silas had struggled brutally to achieve his status as the dreaded Lucifer of London. Silas believed that by marrying into a noble household, his sister would be finally and totally protected from any of the scrutiny that was attached to him. But it made Silas single-minded—he sometimes couldn’t see how high the standard was that he set for Beatrice.

“Beatrice is naturally guarded, Lucifer,” Giovanni said, cautiously trying to broach the topic. “She struggles to...to reveal her heart even to those in her family.”

“I know that,” Silas’s words were very soft, so he would not be overheard. “Especially after what happened to Anna.”

“Indeed,” Giovanni answered quietly, the two of them remembering together the terror and pain of Anna’s kidnapping two years prior. Giovanni knew that Silas still lived with the fear that something like that could happen again, but to Beatrice, or—God forbid—to his young son. Giovanni also felt that fear, but rather than want to push Beatrice towards an attachment to someone wealthy who might protect her, Giovanni’s instinct was to hold Beatrice close, to protect her himself. The idea of her leaving Silas’s home and estate made him nervous. He just wished that Silas would feel the same. He tried to speak his thoughts again.

“With that in mind, should she not... be attached to someone she knows? Someone she trusts implicitly?”

“Gio, I would never bring someone into the family I did not trust,” Silas said quickly, reaching out to grasp Giovanni’s shoulder briefly. “I would never let anyone get close to us who I didn’t think would keep our secrets safe.”

On the one hand, Giovanni was glad that Silas didn’t suspect that his concern had more to do with wanting to keep Beatrice near to him, rather than protecting their old secrets. On the other, he was concerned that Silas had considered this so carefully already. How far had Silas and Anna discussed this match? Was this young viscount already preparing a proposal?

“And you think Lord Milton might be that man?” Giovanni asked, his mouth dry. “You’ve decided that he is appropriate?”

“I think he could be,” Silas said cautiously. Giovanni took a sliver of hope from his words. So Silas was not entirely sure of this man. Nothing was set in stone.

“You are not sure?” Giovanni asked, hoping to confirm his thoughts.

“I will be,” Silas said confidently, dashing Giovanni’s small hopes. “In time. Beatrice needs time to grow to know him, to be comfortable with him. I should never want my sister to marry a man she was not comfortable with. That much is a requirement.”

But you do not require her to love him, Giovanni thought to himself. He could not say it aloud. Even though Giovanni and Silas had always been able to be honest with one another—Giovanni had never held back from serving Silas some honest truths when it was necessary—this was one thing that he would never be able to share with Silas. His feelings towards Beatrice needed to be buried deep down inside. Silas had saved his life; Giovanni owed him everything. He would never jeopardize the family he had made here in England with the Klane’s. Besides, having Beatrice in his life, even if she only thought of him as a second brother, was better than nothing.

“Here comes my wife,” Silas said softly, “it seems Beatrice must like him at least a little.”

Giovanni turned to watch Anna detaching from Beatrice and her suitor as the music for dancing started up. Giovanni’s hand clenched around his brandy glass as he looked at Beatrice’s hand holding onto Lord

Milton's arm. It seemed the entire room was watching the young eligible couple moving forward to take their place at the head of the dancers. Giovanni noticed the twitching fans of the older women, the envious eyes of the young lords and ladies.

"She's accepted him for two dances," Anna said breathlessly, quickly slipping her arm into Silas's, flushing a sweet pink that matched the crimson of her gown. "Two dances! That must be a good sign!"

"Indeed it must," Silas responded, patting his wife's hand at his elbow. Giovanni's heart clenched at this impossibly intimate and sweet gesture between two people who loved one another dearly. It was that kind of familiarity with a partner than he longed for; a lover with whom he could share the passion of his body and the minutiae of his life. Watching Silas find it with Anna had been both encouraging and revealing; now he knew true love was possible. Now he couldn't settle for less.

"Must it not, Gio?" Silas asked, smiling at his friend.

"I think it must," Giovanni said, though the words stuck in his throat.

"Oh, she is the belle of the ball!" Anna sighed, her eyes following her sister appreciatively. "I am so glad I persuaded her to wear that dress. It is perfect on her."

"Indeed, you have done very well with her, my love," Silas said. Anna had been in charge of steering Beatrice's entrance into society since she and Silas had wed. It was a good thing, too, for Silas and Giovanni would not have had a clue between them. Anna, with her excellent background and connections, had certainly aided the Klane family's advancement in the Ton.

"Oh, it is all Beatrice's doing," Anna said, flapping her fan but smiling happily. "Even though she dislikes society, she has persisted with it, and has been rewarded indeed—despite a bumpy start. Why, she has more suitors than I did when I first came out."

"Oh, I can only imagine," Silas teased, rolling his eyes at Giovanni. It was a long-standing joke that while Anna had been a jewel of society, she had married beneath her in accepting Silas. What might have caused resentment and bitterness had blossomed into deep love and the advancement of both their families for the better. "I'm sure your

dance card was positively overflowing, my love.”

“Stop it, Silas!” Anna swatted her husband playfully with her fan, her eyes drawn back to Beatrice again. “Oh, she dances so elegantly. And look how eagerly they prepare for the second,” she whispered.

Anna was not wrong, Giovanni noticed. Beatrice was laughing gently with her partner as they applauded the musicians at the finish of the dance. She looked to be enjoying herself. The notion stung Giovanni, and he sipped his wine, trying to distract himself by smiling flirtatiously at a red-headed woman who had been quite forward with him earlier. Her blushes and fluttering eyelids were little consolation when Beatrice was in his line of sight, glowing like a summer flower.

“I can simply not get used to all these gentlemen watching my baby sister with such fascination,” Silas sighed heavily. “It’s always terribly odd, isn’t it Gio?”

Giovanni nodded without thinking. It was odd for Gio, but not in the way that Silas meant. When he saw Beatrice, it was hard for him not to see her as she was at home, as she had always been before she came out into society. When he closed his eyes he could still see her with her hair loose and flowing in the wind, a laughing smile on her face as she ran across the grounds at Fallenbrook, chasing after Silas’ dogs. For Giovanni, Beatrice had always been all playfulness and lightness, an oasis of uncomplicated, innocent joy that he had always been thoroughly charmed by. He had always had a soft spot in his heart for Silas’s young sister, had always enjoyed the sweet flirtation they had shared together, her wholesome blushes. It was only since she had come out into society that those feelings of tenderness had deepened into something else. Yet now, unlike Silas, it was impossible for him to look at her without seeing the elegant young woman that everyone else in the room saw.

Beatrice was the most beautiful lady in the room. The characteristic playfulness and acerbic disdain that Giovanni knew Beatrice carried for the façades of society were carefully tucked away behind a tidy veneer of ladylike softness and propriety. Her wild, flowing hair was tamed into a stylish arrangement—piled on her head, with curls falling elegantly across her brow and behind her ears to reveal the long tapering of her white, alabaster neck. She was glowing. One might be fooled, Giovanni thought, into thinking it was merely a trick of the gold thread sewn into the white satin of her gown, or the

sparkling diamonds at her throat or in her earrings, but it wasn't. She was stunning. She always had been, but now everyone could see it.

"Her dancing has greatly improved," Anna commented in a whisper. The music was slower this time, more reflective, and a quieter hush had briefly fallen over the room as everyone watched, mesmerized by the elegant, circling couples.

Beatrice and the viscount were at the top of the line of dancers, directly in front of Giovanni. He tried his best not to look at Beatrice, not to admire the soft shine of pale skin and the beautiful outline of her body, not to catch her eye in any way, but he failed. Beatrice's eyes were like the catch of a fishing hook, and as he attempted brush his gaze casually past her, his own eyes snagged on them. For a moment, he was sure there was a spark of recognition, that his Beatrice—the girl beneath the glitter and finery that he knew so well and cared for so deeply—was staring back at him and seeing his true self underneath. It was as if she knew that those hidden compliments, the secret squeeze of her hand in the dance, was all concealing the deep attraction he felt for her. She could feel it; he knew it in his bones.

Then it was gone. In the blink of an eye she had turned away, the dance had finished and the dancers were once again applauding the musicians. It was like he had imagined it.

She didn't see me, Giovanni thought to himself, automatically clapping along with the others. He turned and took a long sip of wine, trying to calm himself down. *It didn't happen*.

"Well," Silas muttered beside him. "That's a turn up for the books."

"Oh my!" Anna gasped. "That's a very good sign!"

Giovanni turned back, following their gazes back to the couple on the dance floor. His stomach lurched as he watched them leaving, arm in arm, walking towards the relative privacy of the terrace, undoubtedly for a more intimate conversation.

Not on my watch, Giovanni thought, setting his wine glass back down.

"I shall go to work, Lucifer," he said quietly, using his position as the family bodyguard as a welcome cover for following the couple.

“Thank you, Gio,” Silas said, smiling trustingly. He had no idea that inside Giovanni’s heart was a flame of anger and envy that was beginning to burn with even more fury. “Give them plenty of room.”

“Of course,” Giovanni said. Then he turned and made his way towards the terrace with the intention of doing no such thing.

Chapter Three

“It is a lovely evening, is it not?” the Lord Milton asked, guiding Beatrice to a quieter part of the terrace.

“It is beautiful,” Beatrice said automatically, following him gracefully and glancing around to politely acknowledge all the ladies and gentlemen enjoying the night air.

“Might this do, Miss Klane?” He asked. The viscount had discreetly turned away from prying eyes and towards the grounds of the great house, gesturing towards the corner of the terrace. They were further away from the light of the doors here, and thus the warmth of the ballroom, meaning it was slightly less populated. They were at least six feet away from the nearest people. It was not privacy, not by a long way, but it was perhaps the closest thing to it that they could expect in the circumstances. Beatrice was now used to every aspect of her life being on display.

“Good evening, Lady Granger,” she said softly as she moved through the crowd. “Good evening Mr Barret.”

These people were nothing to her, just regular faces she knew from balls, and yet they would be partially privy to her quiet conversation with the viscount. She found it utterly absurd that courting was still somehow imagined to be a private ritual, especially when it felt like every single person and their mother knew exactly what was going on in her romantic life. Still, she pushed aside these angry thoughts and politely stood beside Lord Milton, looking out over the rose garden.

“It shall do nicely,” she said, smiling up at him.

She had expected him to push forward with conversation. She had found that most suitors were extremely talkative, often chattering

away about their lives and estates and boring her silly. She was not used to this kind of silence. Nervously, she took a large sip of her champagne glass, even though she had consumed one already.

“The moon is bright,” she said, watching for his reaction. He nodded and smiled, but seemed quite happy to watch her, as if enraptured by her beauty. She supposed he thought this was flattering, but she found it a little off-putting.

“The roses are exceptionally fair this summer,” Beatrice added, her eyes resting on the white arrangements of garden roses in ceramic vases at the patio’s edge, some painted with gold leaf.

“They are, indeed.”

The viscount plucked a long-stemmed white rose from out of the arrangement, handing it to her with a tilt of his head. She was aware of the eyes of the Ton watching them.

“They complement your gown exquisitely,” he added softly.

She wished the words came from somewhere real, but she had the overwhelming sensation that he was also slotting into a role that he was familiar playing. She wondered how many roses he had given out this season. She wondered how many gowns he had complimented. Yet it didn’t stop her following her lines. This was a dance she knew well now.

“Thank you,” Beatrice said.

She took the rose, carefully ensuring that she kept her eyes lowered, trying not to look too eager. As one of the most eligible debutantes of the season, she had to constantly consider how she would be perceived by those watching her. She could hear the ladies’ intrigued mutterings behind their fans, and knew that the news would be spreading back to the ballroom that Lord Milton was courting Lucifer of London’s sister. Breathing in the sweet scent of the rose and allowing herself to close her eyes briefly, she was suddenly overwhelmed with how exhausting it all was. Or perhaps it was all the champagne and the little food in her stomach. The world started to tilt slightly.

“Are you quite well, Miss Klane?” Lord Milton asked.

Beatrice opened her eyes quickly and smiled generously, trying to assure him that they were still on script, but the words wouldn't quite come out.

"Oh," she said, unable to find the perfect excuse suitable for an elegant debutante. She had learned them all by rote, but now not a single one would come to her tongue.

"I - I am fatigued," she finally blurted out, falling back on her old habits. If in doubt, speak the truth. "I find this whole thing... a little overwhelming."

She immediately cursed herself inside her own head. *This is exactly what Anna taught you not to do!*

"I understand," Lord Milton nodded. Beatrice stared at him in surprise, unsure what to say. It was not what she had expected him to respond with.

"You do?" She asked, a little incredulously.

He must have picked up on her tone, because he smiled a little sardonically and said, "Sometimes I find balls to be quite overwhelming, too. So many people..." Lord Milton trailed off, looking over the gardens, his blonde hair catching slightly in the cool breeze.

Beatrice was utterly surprised by his confession—and by all of her interactions with him thus far. How rare it was to find a gentleman who was so kind, so considerate, and didn't try to talk her ear off about some boring old thing. She tilted her head to one side, examining him for a moment. He really was very handsome. Beatrice could hardly fault Anna's taste. She decided to at least try, to at least give the man a chance. It was not like the man she preferred was falling over himself to court her. On the contrary, Giovanni was probably busy flirting his way around the room at that very moment. The champagne inside her curdled to fury at the idea. She turned her attention to the viscount, dismissing all thoughts of Giovanni.

"You prefer solitude to company, then?" She asked, sipping the dregs of her champagne and setting the glass down on one of the small patio tables. With her hands free, she rested them on the terrace edge, leaning forward slightly and smiling up at Lord Milton in what she

hoped was a teasing, flirtatious manner. The same way she had seen that red-headed woman inside look up at Giovanni.

"I prefer the company of those I know," he corrected, his words resonating with Beatrice. "I prefer my own surroundings, my own creature comforts."

"Me too," Beatrice grinned, forgetting for a moment to look dignified before quickly covering her mouth with her fan. She thought she might have been too late, however, because the viscount's smile had quirked too, turning into something more goofy than aloof.

"And those comforts are found here in London?" Beatrice asked, trying to bring the conversation back on track.

"My London house is very comfortable," he nodded. "But I prefer, if I can, to spend my time in the country. Do you like the country?"

"I do," Beatrice said. *A country man too*, Beatrice thought, slightly frustrated. *Is there anything wrong with him, or has Anna used some magic spell to create the perfect gentleman?*

"My family seat is in Devon, and most lovely," he said, spreading his fingers wide on the terrace edge. "I understand that Mr. Klane's estate, Fallenbrook, is most grand indeed?"

"Oh it is," Beatrice smiled, happy for any excuse to talk about the home she loved, and a little loose tongued from too much brandy. "It is a castle, and most delightful. Quite isolated, you see, aside from our villagers and tenants, and very beautiful in all weather..." Beatrice stopped herself, realizing that she was gushing.

She glanced over her shoulder surreptitiously and saw that several ladies of the Ton were standing nearby, eyes flicking between her and Lord Milton. Of course they would be thinking what a fool she was to compare the viscount's country house, which would be grand but passed down generations, to the sprawling, great castle of Fallenbrook which had once been the seat of a great duke and that Silas had purchased at a high price. They would be thinking it was quite improper of her to remind Lord Milton that her brother had a grander estate, even if he had no title. She hated it, but she also remembered the horrible comments that had followed her when she first entered society. *Tradespeople. Unrefined. Common. New money.* Even though

Beatrice's family had more money than most any of her suitors, she knew that there was only one attitude she was allowed to have towards them: submissive, humble, and grateful.

"But I am sure it is nothing to - to Milton house," she said, hurrying to back track, hoping she could save the conversation. However, the Lord Milton held up his hand, smiling and shaking his head.

"Do not worry, Miss Klane," he chuckled. "I am under no illusions as to the comparative grandness of Milton house to Fallenbrook, but I care not. Milton house is my home—I love it for its memories, not its size."

"I feel similarly about Fallenbrook," Beatrice replied. His words had struck her—it was unlike a gentleman of the Ton to not be intimidated by Silas and his fortune, and Beatrice often found their sycophantic need to compete with her brother very off-putting. The viscount was not like that. He seemed... different.

But is he different enough to compare with Giovanni? A voice said inside her. Is anyone? Does his touch or his voice make you feel the way Giovanni does?

Giovanni is a girlhood infatuation! Beatrice scolded herself tersely. He doesn't feel that way about me, and I would be a fool to hold every man to the standards of a fantasy...

"Did you grow up there?" Lord Milton asked. "I had understood a part of your childhood was spent on the continent."

"It was," Beatrice nodded smoothly, the lie of her past slipping easily into place. "My brother's work took us all over Europe, and we moved regularly until I was thirteen years old, when Silas purchased Fallenbrook. It has been my only home ever since."

"I imagine it was quite a childhood," Lord Millton commented. "Roaming all over the continent. I love to travel. I suppose you speak many languages?"

"Oh yes," Beatrice nodded. "French, German, Italian...a little Spanish, a quite shameful amount of Dutch."

"Why, you are more learned than most princesses!" Lord Milton

laughed, looking at her like she was the most interesting girl in the world. She wished that it gave her pleasure to see it, but it actually only made her feel uncomfortable, as if she didn't deserve such admiration. Beatrice shrugged casually, trying not to show her discomfort.

"I have always had an aptitude for languages," she said dismissively.

She didn't say that one required an aptitude for languages when one was shuffled from country to country. Even with an empty stomach and a bit too much to drink, there were some things she could never say. That her many languages were learned at markets and inns, rather than at the feet of an elegant governess. That until she was thirteen years old, her life was one of transience and secrets, and she had not been kept like most ladies were, as caged pretty birds in fine drawing rooms. Until Silas had made the largest part of his fortune and had found a suitable home for her to be safely tucked away in, she had been as free to roam as he and Giovanni had been. She had run up the Spanish Steps in Rome when she was eight years old. When she was eleven, Gio had taken her to race paper boats on the Seine, her dress rolled up around her knees as they paddled near the Louvre. She smiled.

"Something amusing, Miss Klane?" Lord Milton asked, smiling down at her. "You look as if you had a happy thought."

"Oh, I was just thinking of my childhood in Paris," she said, clearing her throat. "It is an elegant city."

She realized then how different her marriage would be to Silas's. Everyone in the Ton knew that Silas had a checkered past, but no one expected her to have been raised as anything other than a proper lady. Whilst Silas could share the darkest parts of his past with Anna, and Anna partly expected it because of his reputation, Beatrice felt as if she could never share those parts of herself with anyone. She knew that Silas had revealed to Anna the horrors they had endured, partly to keep her safe.

By becoming part of the Klane family, Anna had become a part of their secrets, too. But the opposite would be true of Beatrice. Surely a potential husband would be horrified to find out that Silas had been forced to kill their father to save their own lives, that their father had killed their mother; that they had lived in squalor in her early years.

Even after a walk down the aisle, there was every chance such information would be enough to sour a husband against her. No, Beatrice knew in her heart that her life would be full of half-secrets until the day she died.

Unless I married Giovanni, a traitorous part of her mind thought, but Beatrice pushed the thought away, scolding herself for drinking too much and indulging in maudlin thoughts. She had a husband to find, a viscount to impress, and a girlish infatuation to quash. She had no time for her imaginings of Giovanni.

“Well, you are quite impressive,” the viscount said, smiling gently. “How proud your brother must be of you, how proud your family must be.”

“Thank you.”

Beatrice was touched by his gentleness, but not sure that his words had echoes in truth. She suspected that Anna might have been more proud of her if she had come into society with more grace and less criticism, and Silas might have been more proud of her if she had secured a match already.

“I am proud of them also,” she said, her eyes instinctively moving back towards the hall where Anna and Silas stood within.

“So you should be,” Lord Milton said softly. Beatrice looked up into his face quickly, searching it for signs of mockery. The idea that she should be proud that her brother was Lucifer of London was not one she had heard touted around the Ton much. However, she saw only sincerity in the viscount’s pale eyes.

“I am surprised to hear you say so,” Beatrice stepped towards him, angling her body so her lips might not be read by any of the other guests. She kept her voice low as they both huddled in the corner of the terrace, elbows touching as they looked out over the rose garden, hoping that no one was close enough to hear them.

“Most gentlemen do not think of my brother as... distinguished.”

“Ah.” Lord Milton pursed his lips, keeping his gaze straight ahead. He had clearly decided that he didn’t want to be overheard either.

“Well, trust me, Miss Klane, when I say that I care more about what a man has become than where he has come from.”

Beatrice felt herself relax at his words. She did not feel set afire by them, and merely being close to him did not make her heart tremble, but she did feel safe next to him. Many marriages started with less.

“That is... most admirable, my lord.” Beatrice said quietly. “And I thank you.”

“It is I who must thank you, Miss Klane,” the viscount’s eyes met hers. “I did not have high hopes for this evening, but it has surpassed all of my expectations.”

“Is that so?” Beatrice allowed herself a flirty smile, a demure fluttering of her eyelashes. If society had taught her one thing, it was how to put a man under her spell. Beatrice prided herself that she was not vain, but that did not mean she was unaware of the effect her stormy eyes and dark curls had upon men. She didn’t usually like to use such techniques, but his kindness and her dizziness made it seem like a very good idea. Under the cover of pressing the rose against her nose again, she risked a quick glance at his face. His pupils were dark and enlarged and his face was filled with a curiosity that she recognized quickly as the first flush of desire.

“It is,” he said. Beatrice watched his Adam’s apple bob, and he glanced around before leaning a little closer under the pretence of touching the delicate petals of the rose she held in her hand.

“Might I be permitted to call on you, Miss Klane? Perhaps this week?”

It was subtle, but Beatrice could feel the strings Anna had pulled to arrange this match tightening around her. If she wanted this man, he would be hers, Beatrice felt fairly certain of it. She wished that she felt more excited by the prospect.

“Indeed you may, my lord,” Beatrice consented, fluttering her fan. “You may call on us in Grosvenor square at your leisure. We are at the Klane town-house for the season.”

“It shall be my pleasure.” The viscount was smiling broadly, and Beatrice was glad for his happiness. Suddenly a sharp voice cut through their quiet moment.

“Miss Klane!”

Beatrice jumped and turned, the tone of the voice immediately making her feel guilty despite knowing she was doing exactly what she was supposed to do. Then she realized why. Giovanni was only a few steps away, glaring at them both.



Giovanni had been watching them for a while, loitering in the doorway with his hands behind his back and his stance wide, the typical stance of a servant that made him instantly invisible to all of the members of society around him. It had always amazed him how easy it was to traverse fluidly through the different levels of society simply by altering his body language. He sometimes wondered if the genteel ladies and gentlemen around them realized that all of their systems for making themselves greater than others, for feeling superior, were not traits they were magically given at birth, but simply the tools of an actor. They could be learned, they could be falsified—he and Silas and Beatrice were the living proof of it. Silently, he watched Beatrice, content ensuring she was safe while he happily blended into the background. Then the viscount had given her the rose.

It's fine, Giovanni had told himself angrily. *He's a potential suitor, that's what he should be doing—it's just cheap parlour tricks. It won't capture her attention—why would it?*

But then they had turned away from the crowd, deliberately turning their backs so no one could see them. It was a very bold move for a courting couple, who should take pains to show that nothing inappropriate was being said. It was the kind of thing couples who were serious about making a match did.

They're just talking, he reassured himself. *She's spoken with dozens of men this season, there is no reason to think that anything—*

Then Lord Milton was leaning closer, touching the fine petals of the rose in the intimate space between them, his face full of raw desire, and Beatrice—his little Beatrice—was looking up at him with such flirtation.

Giovanni saw red. Before he could account for his behaviour, he was

slinking unseen through the crowd until he was beside them. He cleared his throat. They didn't hear him. They just kept looking at each other, making plans for the viscount to call on Beatrice, as if she was any other lady he might be courting. He would not allow Beatrice to be taken in by such cheap tricks. It was his job to protect her and he was determined to do so.

"Miss Klane!" He said, a little too sharply.

She jumped and turned to him, her face flushed adorably pink with guilt, just as she used to do when he would catch her sneaking spoonfuls of jam from the kitchen as a young girl.

"Gio!" She pressed a hand to her heart, the rose in her hand crushing against her cleavage. Giovanni couldn't stop his eyes from following it, but then instantly looked at Lord Milton, whose gaze was fixed on the same location of the white bloom against her white skin.

The cad! Giovanni folded his arms, raising his eyebrows at the viscount who, realizing he was being watched, dropped his gaze quickly and blushed deeply.

"Lord Milton, let me introduce Signore Giovanni Amante, my brother's business associate."

"Well met indeed, Amante," the viscount nodded to Giovanni elegantly. "I hear good things about your work."

"Do you?" Giovanni kept his tone even and barely nodded his head to the young man. The viscount flushed even deeper, well aware that Giovanni had seen him gazing at Beatrice's bosom, and averted his eyes. Giovanni, proud to have won that round, turned to Beatrice.

"Your brother asks for you, Miss Klane."

He extended his arm, gesturing for her to move back inside with him. Unfortunately for him, Beatrice knew him nearly as well as he knew himself. She narrowed her eyes at him and didn't move.

"He does?" She said, in the acerbic tone she reserved for when she was quite put out. "I was under the impression that my brother preferred me to keep Lord Milton company at this time."

She widened her eyes, trying to tell him silently that she wanted to be left alone with the viscount, but Giovanni chose to wilfully misunderstand her, despite the fact that everything she said was undoubtedly true. Silas would definitely want her to continue talking to Lord Milton. Unfortunately, Giovanni didn't care much what Silas thought at this moment. Blood was pounding in his ears and all he could think about was getting Beatrice away from the other man.

"His preferences have altered." He turned his eyes back to the viscount. "Based on behaviour."

"On behaviour?" Beatrice exclaimed. "What could you possibly mean by that?"

"It is of no import," Lord Milton said, avoiding Giovanni's gaze, clearly desperate that he not be revealed as having looked at Beatrice lustily. "I am sure we can resume this conversation another time."

"Of course it is of import!" Beatrice said, glaring at Giovanni. "What can you possibly mean in interrupting me? It is entirely uncivilised—"

"I am tasked with safeguarding the young lady's welfare," Giovanni spoke over Beatrice, addressing his words to the viscount. "I do not think Lucifer would be pleased to hear she has been... cornered on the terrace."

Giovanni watched as the word "Lucifer" had its desired effect. The pink tinge drained from the viscount's face and he turned sharply to Beatrice, smiling tightly.

"I shall bid you good night, Miss Klane," he said, taking her hand and bowing low over it. Then, to Giovanni's utter annoyance, he kissed it and added, "For now."

"We shall see," Giovanni said darkly. "Lucifer will be in touch."

"Oh—well, goodnight, my lord," Beatrice stammered, curtsying in confusion. Giovanni saw the way the viscount looked at him as he left—the younger man was scared of him, of Giovanni's dark eyes and coarse manner, and his association with Lucifer. But he also wanted Giovanni to know that he would be back. Giovanni glared daggers at him, safe in the knowledge that he had a distinctive fearsome countenance when necessary.

“What were you thinking?” Beatrice hissed, slapping him with her fan. “He is my suitor! You can’t scare him away!”

“He was not behaving appropriately,” Giovanni folded his arms and tried to stare her down. A hard thing to do, since Beatrice Klane had been raised by a man for whom staring others down was nothing more than a fun pastime.

“He was behaving entirely appropriately,” Beatrice snapped, her eyes dancing around the assembled group who Giovanni knew were whispering behind their fans. “What will people think? They will assume Silas ordered you to chase him away.”

“They’ll do nothing of the sort,” Giovanni placated quietly. “They’ll assume Silas Klane is keeping his greatest treasure close to his chest, as is appropriate. No one suitor should be given such liberties.”

“I - I don’t—” Beatrice spluttered, unusually lost for words for a moment. She seemed surprisingly flustered, and the skin of her neck was very pink. Was something wrong?

“What liberties? Let us deal with that first, then perhaps we can deal with the concept that I am my brother’s property—”

“You know I did not mean that,” Giovanni said, trying to calm her down. “And is it not the act of a libertine to drag you into the corner of a terrace? To stand so closely? To look at you so...” Giovanni struggled for the word, “wantonly?”

“Of course he was looking at me that way,” Beatrice hissed. “That’s the point!”

Giovanni’s heart clenched a little at her words. One thing he despised about Beatrice coming out in society was that it had made her much worldlier—more experienced in the art of courtship. How he missed the young, fresh girl who would blush just to hear her name spoken in Italian! Still, this was the first time he had ever seen her openly flirt with another man. It was out of character, and irritated him no end.

“That’s the point?” He hissed back. “I think I should hardly know you with that attitude.”

“Well perhaps you do not know me as well as you think!” Beatrice

shot back, shaking her head a little as if she was dizzy. It was an unusual action for her, and an even more unusual choice of comment. He and Beatrice never spoke of themselves, of their friendship, of their long years living together like family. That she would choose to comment now was strange. Then, he considered her outward flirting, equally uncharacteristic, and her dizziness. He noticed an empty champagne glass on the small table beside her and groaned inwardly.

“How much have you had to drink?” He asked sharply.

“What?” Beatrice challenged him lowly, her voice dangerous. Like her brother, when she was truly incensed she was more likely to become cold and deadly than fiery and chaotic.

“How much?” He demanded, matching her tone, his eyebrows raised. She had never had a talent for staring him down, and her eyes darted tellingly to the empty glass.

“That is none of your concern!” She blustered. “I cannot believe you would ask me that, Giovanni!”

“Time to go,” Giovanni said abruptly.

“What?”

Giovanni knew that he was losing her affection, that perhaps he had done entirely the wrong thing by interrupting, and maybe there would be hell to pay with Silas later. But right now, he didn’t care. He clung to the excuse of alcohol as if it was his only lifeline, and grasped her elbow.

“You are drunk,” he manoeuvred her towards the stairs. “I’m taking you home immediately.”

Chapter Four

Beatrice walked with Giovanni back into the ballroom, incensed by his suggestion. How dare he even suggest such a thing to her? She rounded on him as soon as they were inside.

"You cannot make me go home, or tell me what to do, I am not a child!" She hissed.

"We are going home," Giovanni snapped, his dark eyes blazing with angry fire. "This moment!"

"Or what?" Beatrice challenged, unable to stop herself from meeting his burning gaze.

"Or I shall tell your brother that you are drunk," Giovanni whispered in her ear. "If you think I'm irritated by it, imagine how he shall be."

"It is perfectly normal for a lady to have a few glasses of champagne," Beatrice spluttered, trying to think of an excuse. "I have not eaten properly, that is all—"

"Try that on Silas, see if he cares." Giovanni shrugged in his infuriatingly Italian manner, his hand still firmly grasping her elbow. "But do expect a long lecture on the proper amount of imbibing for ladies, which I know you shall hate. That is if I know you at all."

Beatrice winced at his words. She had not meant to suggest Giovanni was unimportant to her, quite the opposite. In the moment, she had hoped to remind him that she was no longer a child, that she didn't want to be thought of by him as the little sister in need of rescuing. Instead, she had clearly slighted him and he was insulted. She sighed heavily. The idea of a lecture from Anna and Silas was very unappealing.

“We shall go home,” she said imperiously, as if it were all her idea. Giovanni nodded as they approached Anna and Silas.

“Beatrice is unwell,” Giovanni announced to the couple, who stood happily in the corner of the room watching the dancers with excitement on their faces. “I am taking her home.”

Both of their expressions fell at his words. Anna looked crushed, but she immediately reached for Beatrice’s arm.

“Oh dear, are you feeling faint?” She asked. “Of course we will return with you.”

Anna looked reluctantly at Silas, who nodded sadly. Beatrice felt terrible. Why was Giovanni forcing her to ruin their evening as well as her own? It was hardly fair. Anna had not had an opportunity to dance since Caleb was born, and even though Silas disliked large gatherings, he had seemed to be finally enjoying himself. Even if she was dizzy with a little too much champagne, it hardly seemed like reason to dash their hopes for the evening.

“No,” Beatrice said, squeezing Anna gently. “It is absurd that we should all leave on my account. You both stay, enjoy yourselves—”

“Beatrice,” Giovanni warned, clearly trying to remind her of their agreement for her to leave the party.

“Giovanni can take me home,” Beatrice continued, glaring at him deliberately. “I shall be more than safe in his company.”

Anna and Silas looked at each other, unsaid words passing between them. Generally, since the attempt on Silas and Anna’s lives, they preferred to stay together as a family unit at functions and not split the security that Silas employed to chaperone the family safely home. Clearly the lure of an evening out of the house was significant, because Silas said slowly, “I suppose if Giovanni is accompanying her...”

“And you are completely sure?” Anna added, looking at Beatrice intensely. “You shall not need me?”

“Of course not,” Beatrice smiled sweetly. “All I require is some sleep, I am sure.”

“Well, if you are feeling faint you must have something to drink.” Anna passed her champagne glass to Beatrice, who took it with a sugary smile.

“If you insist, sister.”

She grinned at Giovanni and set it to her lips, holding his gaze as she steadily drained the glass.

You can't boss me around, she tried to say with her eyes. *I am my own woman! I make my own decisions.*

He frowned at her, showing his irritation, but Beatrice didn't care. There was nothing he could say in front of Silas and Anna, and if he was going to accuse her of drunkenness, then she might as well play the part. Finishing up and licking her lips, she slipped her hand into his elbow.

“Let us go, Giovanni,” she smiled at Anna and Silas. “Good night, brother. Good night, sister.”

As Giovanni led her through the crush of people, she instantly regretted her choice to drain the champagne glass. The world had a strange tilt on it that she couldn't shake, and as Giovanni walked her down the main steps she had to grasp his arm even tighter and concentrate hard on not slipping over her own feet. As they waited for their carriage to come around, she tried to stand up straight, spreading her fingers wide and pressing her palms down towards the ground, as if she could subtly stop the world from spinning away from her. Giovanni watched her with an exasperated expression.

“And, of course, you're clearly not intoxicated,” he snorted, folding his arms grumpily. “Christ alive, we're lucky he only looked at you.”

Beatrice bristled at the suggestion.

“Are you implying that I would play the light-skirt for him?” She hissed, unable to stop herself from stumbling slightly towards him. Giovanni's hand instantly shot out to steady her, his dark green eyes glittering with annoyance.

“I should hardly say. I barely know you, after all,” he snapped.

“Oh, Giovanni,” Beatrice moaned, closing her eyes in frustration. Her head was starting to pound. She unconsciously leaned against him, enjoying the tangy, summery smell of him. Oranges and tobacco.

“Beatrice, don’t—” Giovanni was trying to push her away from him, but she felt too heavy in her body to move. She allowed her head to rest momentarily on his shoulder.

“I didn’t mean those things,” she sighed, feeling intensely sleepy. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“Get in,” Giovanni hustled her quickly towards the carriage, practically pushing her up the step so that she was flung against the leather seating.

“Don’t push me!” She complained as Giovanni jumped in opposite her and slammed the door closed.

“Well, what else should I do when you decide it is somehow appropriate to fawn over me in front of everyone?” He said, leaning back and titling his head towards the ceiling, sighing in exasperation. “Thank God it was only me.”

“What do you mean by that?” Beatrice stared at the dark, tanned skin of his throat. His skin was the most delicious colour; it always had been. Like milky coffee. Beatrice licked her lips. Perhaps she *had* drunk too much.

“I mean thank God the viscount didn’t get a taste of your champagne-infused affection,” Giovanni glared at her. “Who knows what he would have done with it.”

“You have such a low opinion of him.” Beatrice rolled her eyes. “He would have done nothing about it, of course. He is... quite the gentleman.”

She lifted her rose and waved it in front of Giovanni’s face as evidence. He swatted it away in annoyance.

“Besides, I am hardly out of my wits,” she added, poking him on the nose with the bloom, giggling at his thunderous expression.

“Bea, stop it—”

Giovanni didn't get a chance to tell her off properly. Beatrice lurched forward as the carriage began its journey from the house, so unsettled by their argument and the brandy that she was thrown into Giovanni's lap in a tangle of skirts and limbs.

“Oh yes,” Giovanni chuckled, his warm breath fluttering the loose curls around her face. She was suddenly very close to him. “You are entirely in your right mind.”

“I am quite myself,” Beatrice snapped primly, struggling to regain her balance. She would have found it romantic or erotic to be suddenly so close to him, aware of his broad, muscled chest pressing against her breasts, if not for the fact that in her efforts to prove her stability she thwacked him in the nose with her elbow.

“Ow!” Giovanni clapped his hand over his face.

“Oh Gio, I'm sorry!” She cried, reaching for his face, but Giovanni turned away and cursed in fluent Italian. Beatrice understood every word and couldn't help but giggle.

“Language!” She chided, elbowing him deliberately as she struggled to disentangle herself, settling for clumping down on the seat beside him, her skirts spread over his knees. “Lord Milton would hardly speak to me like that now, would he?”

“Lord Milton is still a man!” Giovanni rebuked, pinching the bridge of his nose and blinking quickly. “Gentleman or not, if you had presented yourself to him as you are now...” His eyes lingered over her flushed appearance, her tousled hair. Then he glared down at her white rose, now a little wilted, in her hand.

“White roses indeed,” he muttered. “Why didn't he give you a red one and simply declare his intent before all?”

“Oh, I suppose that's what you would have done to charm a lady this evening!” Beatrice snapped, trying to distract herself from how it felt when those engaging, delightful eyes had raked over her body. “Who I am sure throw themselves at you with the first word, red roses hardly needed!”

“Now who has a low opinion of whom?” Giovanni exclaimed, glaring at her. “I do not see how who I charm is any of your business!”

It might have been the champagne in her belly or the closeness of their bodies, but Beatrice felt her temper light. Like Silas, she desperately tried to keep her propensity for rage well in hand, but there was something about Giovanni that infuriated her to the point of insanity.

“Says the man who spent the whole evening meddling in my business!” Beatrice shouted back, poking him roughly in the chest. “Who are you to say who I dance with, or even who takes liberties with me, as you so kindly put it?”

“I am your friend,” Giovanni yelled back, his Italian accent becoming thicker with each word. “For God’s sake, Bea, I am only trying to look out for you—”

“I don’t need to be looked after,” Beatrice cried, feeling tears of frustration mount. What did she need to do to convince Giovanni that she was not a child? How was it that every man of her acquaintance saw her as a woman, but he still couldn’t see anything but the wild little girl he’d first met?

“Clearly you do, or you wouldn’t be foxed!” Giovanni shouted, throwing up his hands in disbelief. “What kind of behaviour do you call that display this evening?”

“What part was so objectionable?” Beatrice demanded bitterly. “The part where I danced with the man, just as I was required, or the part where I had a quiet discussion with him, as was expected?”

“The flirting!” Giovanni yelled.

He looked at her with such thunder in his green eyes that Beatrice was suddenly quite unsettled. The look she saw there was not the glance of a man who was ashamed of a woman he saw as a sister. If she didn’t know any better, and she wasn’t entirely sure that she did, she would think it was the smouldering glare of a jealous lover.

“Why do you care who I flirt with?” She snapped back, trying to hide her discontent, but also wondering what might happen if she pushed him further. She had the feeling that they were teetering on the edge

of a cliff, and one more outburst might push them over it. She didn't know what would come next, but she had an urgent need to find out.

"You see me only as a child," she remarked hotly, "a young nuisance to be rallied and organized, and dressed up and sent out into society, like some show dog or a wayward puppy!"

"You are young, Bea, you need to be careful with whom you give such attentions to," Giovanni was trying to speak in a calmer tone, but Beatrice noticed the way his hands clenched on his knees. "There is so much you don't know, so much you don't understand—"

"Don't speak to me like that," Beatrice cried out, pushing him in annoyance. "As if I know nothing, as if I am some innocent flower—do you forget how I grew up, how we lived?"

"This isn't about that!" Giovanni shouted back. "This is about men and their ways!"

He was flushed now, his darker skin reddening around the ears. Beatrice didn't care if he was embarrassed talking to her about these things; she was tired of being treated like she was stupid. She shook her head at him, frustrated that he refused to see her the way she wanted to be seen.

"You're just like Silas, you don't trust me to make my own decisions," she snapped, breathing heavily and starting to move back across to the other side of the seat.

"How am I supposed to trust you when you act like you did tonight?" Giovanni's hand was around her wrist, pulling her back beside him, his dark eyes glaring at her. His hands were hot against her skin. "You know better, Bea."

"And you know better than to try and control me," Beatrice shouted back, wrenching her hand from his grip only to find his other hand on her other wrist. She was suddenly very aware of his strength and agility, that if she tried to run from him he would, at this moment, catch her and pin her down until she listened. Part of her wished he would.

"I wouldn't have to control you if you weren't making such foolish errors in judgement," he shouted back, his face far too close to hers.

She could see his long dark eyelashes, the dark waves of his hair. God, how she wanted to run her fingers through it.

“What on earth would you get up to if left to your own devices?” he growled.

Beatrice was done. She was done with being treated like a child, and done with denying herself what she most wanted. Him.

“This!”

She moved forward, quick as a cat, and had a moment to register the shock and surprise in his face. But she also noticed a hint of the very thing she was hoping for—deep in his eyes, she saw a burning desire. She closed her eyes and kissed him.



Beatrice was kissing him.

Beatrice was kissing him. Beatrice was kissing him!

Giovanni felt like his brain had stopped working, and whilst it jarred over and over on this one thought, his body had taken over control. He was kissing her back, because of course he was; he had burned for her for years., And yet his hands held onto her shoulders, as if he knew he would have to push her away at any moment.

Push her away! You shouldn't be doing this, this is a huge betrayal of Silas's trust. She is drunk, she is compromised—

“Bea,” he whispered against her lips, his mind finally catching up to his mouth. “Bea, we can’t do this.”

“What’s the matter?” She gasped against his lips. “Do you want to stop?”

She pulled away to look at him. Her dark curls were beginning to unwind out of her stylish hair arrangement. Her dark eyes were black coals in the dim light of the carriage, lit from inside with a burning fire. Her red lips were plump and flushed from the blood that rushed there. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly inside her exquisite gown, a

sign of her own excitement.

Holy mother of God, please help me, Giovanni prayed. *She is the most alluring creature I've ever seen.*

"No," Giovanni's voice was hoarse. "But I should."

Beatrice eyed him carefully. Not for the first time, Giovanni felt like she was seeing every part of him in that moment. It was a thoroughly disconcerting—but thoroughly erotic—feeling, and he let out his own low, shuddering breath.

"Why?" Beatrice whispered. Her gloved fingers found his hand, entwining hers with his. "If I like it... and you like it..."

Giovanni's heart almost stopped at the words "I like it," but he shook his head, closing his eyes tightly, as if by not seeing her he would no longer need her so desperately.

"You are drunk. You don't know what you like," he stated. "You will regret it bitterly in the morning. Besides, you are Silas's sister. I owe him everything. It is hardly appropriate."

He kept his eyes closed, hoping this rebuttal would be enough to deter her. Perhaps she would simply forget all of this in the morning, and it would become nothing but a champagne-tinged dream she only looked back on with embarrassment and not horror. But then he felt those clever, insistent fingers stroking his arms, and a warm body moving closer, warm legs pressing against his.

"Bea—" he began, but then felt the skin of one slim finger pressed against his lip. With a jolt of desire he opened his eyes to find Beatrice kneeling on the seat beside him, her gloves removed, the pins in her hair pulled out and her finger against his lips as she looked down on him. Dark curls waved over her shoulders and around her neck. The long, bare skin of her arms, urgently begging to be kissed, called out to him.

Sweet Jesus save me, he thought rapidly, swallowing hard. He wanted to speak, to dissuade her, but if he did he would feel her touch against his moving lips. He was not sure he could stop himself from kissing her finger, from licking her it, from taking her into his mouth and—

"I am not just Silas's sister," she whispered, staring down at him intensely, as if daring him to interrupt. "I am my own woman, and I am not so drunk as to not know my needs. I know what I want. So the only question left is..."

She removed her finger from his lips, slipping her hand around the back of his head and into his hair. It felt luxurious. He had fantasized so often about this moment, this feeling of her quick hands twisted in his hair and sending shivers down his spine. Giovanni's thoughts were a mess.

Jesus Christ, where did she learn this? God, I don't want to know that.

Beatrice lowered her mouth perilously close to his, so close he could smell the sweet tang of champagne on her breath. He wanted to taste her so badly.

"What do you want, Gio?" She breathed.

Giovanni sent a prayer up to heaven, but knew he could no longer resist her.

"You," Giovanni growled.

Her lips met his in a rush of sudden passion that nearly had him toppling backwards. He grasped her waist to steady her and was instead suddenly aware of the miracle of her quick and lithe body underneath her dress, the smallness of her waist and her pert, small breasts. He leaned backwards against the seat, roughly pulling her astride him. She gasped but continued to kiss him, her lips insistent and her hands tangling in his hair almost painfully. He had never imagined she would be capable of such passion, such heady, writhing energy as she knelt astride him, her elegant skirt rucked up around her knees. Giovanni couldn't help his hands from reaching down to trace the lines of her stockings. The shock of the warm flesh of her knees pulling him back to reality. If he kept on like this he was in very great danger of taking her then and there—her brother be damned, her innocence be damned, his own soul be damned! Thankfully, at that moment, the carriage started to slow down. Giovanni broke his face away, turning away from her gorgeous lips.

"We are home," he gasped.

Instantly, Beatrice withdrew. Part of Giovanni was thankful, praising God above that Giovanni had not been so taken with desire that he had ravaged Beatrice on the doorstep of Klane House. But another part was cursing every power that be that she was no longer in his arms. He could invite her up to his bedroom—Silas would be away the whole evening. They were alone in the house.

No one would know.

“Beatrice,” he whispered hoarsely, but the footman was already climbing down and opening the door. She tidied her hair quickly and straightened her gown, not meeting his eye.

Giovanni wondered if their escapade had been enough to sober her up, if she now regretted her actions, but then those dark, starry eyes caught his. She smiled slowly, seductively and whispered, “Goodnight, Signore,” in a way she must know he would find appealing. She still wanted him. God, she was miraculous. He wanted to speak, he wanted to invite her upstairs, to produce any excuse to have her lips on his again, but he couldn’t.

“Goodnight,” Giovanni swallowed hard, fighting back the urge to kiss her again. “*Bella.*”

Beatrice ducked out of the carriage and was gone. Giovanni groaned and cursed, staring up at the dark roof of the carriage. He knew he could have had her. He flattered himself that he knew enough of female desire to know when a woman was ready to be seduced, and Beatrice had surely been his for the taking. Yet despite this knowledge, he had faltered. Why had he hesitated now, with the woman he wanted more than any other, when he had never faltered before?

“Because Beatrice isn’t that kind of woman,” he muttered to himself, staring out of the window to watch her enter the townhouse, her white and gold dress glowing in the street lights. “Even if I am that kind of man.”

However it seemed like a faint line to draw now, after ravishing her so thoroughly only moments ago. If Silas had caught them like that, what would have done? Giovanni dreaded to think. He cursed again, putting his head in his hands. He couldn’t allow this lust for Beatrice to overtake him completely. Silas was the best man he had ever

known, and the most loyal friend, and yet Giovanni had repaid his loyalty with the worst kind of betrayal. All he could hope now was that Beatrice was too drunk to remember the encounter in the morning.

Never again, Giovanni swore to himself. I will never touch her again.

Chapter Five

Beatrice was dancing with Giovanni in the garden. Mist fell around them and white rose petals scattered the floor. Held in the tightness of his embrace she felt safe, comforted, as if nothing could be better. Then she felt his hand moving up her spine to the bare skin of her back, a thumb tracing along the edge of her gown. She felt tremors inside her but continued to waltz, as if her feet were barely touching the ground. Giovanni's scent was overpowering her, the smell of bright oranges and spicy tobacco. His strong fingers trailed up her spine to tangle into her hair, his green eyes shining in the moonlight as he tilted his face even closer to hers.

"What do you want, Bella?" He whispered. With one arm around her waist, he tipped her backwards in a romantic lean so Beatrice could see the moon shining behind him.

"You," she whispered. "Only you."

His lips crushed hers, his tongue exploring her mouth and his hands cradling her face as he pulled her back upright. Beatrice's fingers found their way into his hair, soft and so heavily scented.

"Oh, Gio," she gasped, as his hands roved over her breasts. "I want you so badly."

In a moment, he had pushed her against a Grecian pillar, his hands lifting her skirts and pulling her stockinged legs around his waist.

"Have me, then," he gasped back.

"Miss Klane? Miss Klane!"

Beatrice opened her eyes to see her maid, Georgia, calling her name as

she opened the curtains in Beatrice's room. Beatrice groaned and pushed the pillow over her face, wishing she could return to her dream.

"Are you alright, miss?" Georgia asked, striding to the bed. "You were crying out in your sleep, and you're terribly flushed."

"I am fine," Beatrice groaned, trying not to sound too snappish or ungrateful, though her heart was racing a mile a minute and there was a persistent ache between her legs that she knew would have no relief.

"I shall open the window," Georgia decided, nodding her head smartly. "You must get so hot under all these duvets."

"Yes indeed," Beatrice said, trying not to think about the fact that the heat radiating all over her body was due the lingering sensation of Giovanni's imagined hands sliding up underneath her dress. She lifted her hair away from her neck, allowing cold air to cool the sticky skin there.

"Take some water, miss." Georgia poured her a glass from the jug on the side table and Beatrice drank gratefully. However, no amount of water could wash away the imprint of Giovanni's face on her mind.

"Better?" Georgia asked, crossing to the wardrobe.

Beatrice nodded, lying. "Much."

"What shall you wear today, miss?"

"My blue silk," Beatrice said, pushing the blankets away from her hot flesh and sipping her water. "The one with the organza sleeves."

"Really?" Georgia asked, frowning. "Are you expecting a caller today, miss? It is such a lovely gown."

"No, no I only thought I might wear it since it was such a lovely day," Beatrice lied brightly.

She did have a plan for today. She had spent the last two days avoiding it, barely being able to think or speak as her mind recalled her carriage ride with Giovanni. The memories were so hazy, that on

the first morning she woke up she was sure it must have been a dream. However, as the days passed, more details slipped back to her, mainly in her dreams.

What do you want? You. That was a new one.

She had fantasized about Giovanni in the past, but never with such lurid, specific details. Besides, she could remember what his touch felt like. She remembered how it made her feel. That could not be fabricated from her own imagination. She was nearly completely convinced that despite the champagne and her piece-meal memories, her dreams were based on reality. But there was one problem—Giovanni.

He had been avoiding her, dodging her gaze, even turning around and walking in the other direction when he saw her. She knew he knew something about what had happened. He was hiding it, and today, Beatrice was going to find out exactly what he was trying to avoid.

Beatrice walked through the grand hallways of the Klane townhouse, knowing instinctively where she would find Giovanni. At this time of day, late in the morning, he usually took a coffee in the small library at the back of the house after spending the morning with Silas in his study. She slipped her head around the door. Giovanni was seated in a green leather-backed chair reading the newspaper, a small cup of coffee beside him. He was so handsome in the morning light that for a moment it took her breath away. Just the sight of him, of his dark eyebrows furrowed as he read and his large hands turning the pages, was enough to renew that flushing tingling all over her body.

Those hands, brushing against the outline of her stockings. Those lips, pressed against hers. That hair, soft and warm in her fingers.

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the persistent memories from two nights ago. She had to speak to him. He would be able to set her straight. Though how she could broach the topic of whether she really had done those things was beyond her.

“Gio,” she coughed, suddenly unsure how to address him after everything that had happened. “Giovanni.”

“Beatrice!”

He turned to look at her and jumped to his feet, accidentally spilling a little coffee on himself. He swore under his breath and shook the damp newspaper out in front of him before turning to her. His eyes were wary.

“Miss Klane, how can I help you?”

Beatrice’s heart dropped at his formal expression. She wondered if it were possible for a man to treat her with such formal indifference after holding her so closely, kissing her so intimately? Had she misunderstood her memories? Or perhaps Giovanni simply didn’t want to remember. Either way, Beatrice was going to find out where he stood.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” Beatrice said, quietly closing the door behind her. She noticed the way Giovanni’s eyes flickered between her and the door. He was never usually this twitchy around her, but he shook his head, smiling in his usual charming way.

“Oh, have you missed me?”

He tilted his head to one side sweetly, but didn’t meet her eyes. It felt like an imitation of the friendly banter they usually had together, as if he was striving for normalcy but was unable to achieve it.

“Your brother has been keeping me very busy.”

“Not every second of the day,” Beatrice rebuked him, stepping towards him with the caution that she might use to approach a nervous horse. She watched him carefully for signs of interest or arousal, anything that would confirm her memories of the carriage ride and the man who had clung to her so hungrily.

“Well I assumed you were embarrassed,” Giovanni said slowly. Beatrice’s heart jumped. Was he going to admit that they had kissed? “After drinking too much at the ball.”

“Ah.” Beatrice nodded, trying to decide if she thought that was reason enough for his strange behaviour. “I feared that you were avoiding me
—”

“I’m not,” Giovanni interrupted a bit too quickly.

“—because I had done something terrible to offend you,” Beatrice paused. “Were you very upset with me? Was it for the drinking?”

“No, of course not,” Giovanni shook his head, smiling in his usual way but still not meeting her gaze. “I have not been avoiding you, and you have done nothing wrong.”

His words should have been comforting, but they sounded hollow—like something he was saying to make her go away. The trouble was, Beatrice couldn’t tell which part was a lie. Was he pretending he wasn’t angry with her for drinking, or was he pretending she had done nothing wrong when he knew that they had kissed? She swallowed hard, trying to think of a way to test him.

“I suppose I should take more care next time,” she dipped her head, trying to look contrite. “I should have eaten more supper before leaving. Still, no harm done, I suppose.”

“It happens,” Giovanni’s shrugged, looking out of the sunny window. “Like you said, no harm done.”

Based on her memories of what happened before the carriage ride and of Giovanni’s anger at her drunken state, she felt that if he was still angry then she would definitely feel it now. He would be baited by her saying that no harm was done, and give her a lecture as he had done before they left the ball. Instead, he looked as if he was distracted from what she was saying. She decided to try a different tack.

“You know,” she began slowly, “I’m actually struggling to remember exactly what happened after we left the ball.”

“Oh?”

That had got his attention. To anyone else, it would have seemed like Giovanni was simply alert, but Beatrice knew him well enough to know the signs of when he was paying close attention. His usually active hands stilled, his usually diverting eyes were starkly focused. He was listening carefully to what she was saying. Beatrice thought he even looked like he was holding his breath. She didn’t think that he would look so tense if nothing had happened between them. She had lived all of her life around men with secrets, and he looked like a man with a secret to hide. She decided to probe a little further.

“Yes, it might be the champagne, but my memory seems... a little fuzzy.”

She moved closer to him, standing on the other side of the small table. She reached down to touch his coffee cup, turning the handle to a right angle, trying to listen to his breathing pattern. It seemed regular, but he was very still, very tense. Giovanni was usually relaxed around her. If they had been having this conversation a week earlier, he would have sat back down in the chair, would have invited her to join him. She would have teased him about his strong coffee and he would have made her try it. They would have giggled and teased each other as they always used to. Now, he was standing completely erect, barely moving, as if she was a predator stalking him.

“Fuzzy?” His voice was low and quiet. His fingers were still on the newspaper. Beatrice didn’t dare look up into his face. “Fuzzy in what way?”

He shifted uncomfortably and Beatrice knew he was fighting for the right words. She knew he was watching what he said.

“What do you remember?” He finally asked.

“I remember coming down the stairs,” Beatrice swallowed, remembering stumbling on his arm, holding him close. “I remember us fighting, I remember you being very curt with me...”

“Do you remember anything after we got into the carriage?” Giovanni asked urgently. It was a sign that something was very off that he didn’t rise to her baiting comments about his behaviour, instead focusing only on the carriage. At that moment, Beatrice knew that she was right—that it had all happened.

They kissed inside the carriage, his lips pressed against hers, her hands on his body, his arms pulling her into his lap—

Beatrice quickly stopped the train of her thoughts, feeling a heavy blush climbing up her throat. She focused on the books for a moment before answering his question. She wanted to be able to watch his face, to try and see if he was hiding something from her when she answered. She looked back up to him, watching his expression carefully.

"I remember leaning against you." Giovanni's eyebrows twitched together at her words. "I remember feeling tired, and then you bundling me into the carriage..."

She let her words trail off, watching him carefully. She thought she saw him pale slightly, noticed his throat working, as if he was fighting to swallow.

"And after that?" He asked quietly.

She left him hanging for a moment, looking into his eyes, trying carefully to see any shifts, trying to discern if memories were frittering through his mind. Was he thinking about her? About her lips against his and her body pressed against him?

"Nothing," she whispered, then spoke a little clearer, not wanting to reveal how flustered her heart was by her thoughts. "Nothing at all. It's, like I said, fuzzy."

"You remember nothing?" Giovanni's voice was guarded.

Beatrice shrugged, trying to look unruffled, as if she wasn't recalling in minute detail the sensation of his fingers on her legs. She tried to casually pick up his coffee, with the same cavalier familiarity that they had experienced in their lives together before. Her hand was shaking a little but she hid it with a quick sip of strong coffee. She winced, as she was prone to, and said casually, "Good God, Giovanni, could it be any stronger?"

She would expect him to bat back with a quip about how she was silly and an English weakling, but he simply pressed his point harder, turning the newspaper in his hands.

"Are you saying you recall nothing of what happened in the carriage?" He asked.

"No," she set the coffee cup down, looking up at him carefully. "Why? What happened in the carriage?"

She watched his face closely, hoping that this would be the moment that he might decide to own up to what had happened. She hoped that she might be able to see a flash of the Gio she knew so well, the Gio who had fought with her so angrily in the carriage and kissed her with

so much passion. What she saw, however, was the quick, suave façade of him clicking into place.

“Nothing happened,” he said smoothly. “You had a little too much to drink, as you said. You fell asleep.”

“I fell asleep? Nothing else?”

Beatrice didn’t know exactly what she had been expecting from Giovanni, but she knew she was disappointed. She knew Giovanni must have had many encounters like this one, with many different women. Perhaps this wasn’t even his only encounter in a carriage with a slightly intoxicated woman. Perhaps this was always the way he dealt with those situations, both he and the compromised lady simply denying it ever took place, but it bothered her. Giovanni was more than that to her. She had hoped she was more than that to him.

You fool! Giovanni has had ladies falling at his feet all over Europe. Who are you to think you’re something special to a worldly man like him?

“Nothing at all,” Giovanni said breezily.

Beatrice nodded, trying to swallow her disappointment. She knew what that meant. He was trying to forget. She must guard her heart and try to forget, too.

“Then I had nothing to be concerned about, I am sure,” she said, handing his coffee cup back to him. As she did, their fingers brushed together. It was like a static shock ran straight up her arm. She jumped back, accidentally dropping the cup, smashing it between them on the hard wooden floor.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Beatrice dropped to her knees and so did Giovanni, both of them reaching for the pieces of crockery.

“No, don’t!” Giovanni grabbed her hand, stopping her from touching the broken pieces. “It is sharp, you might cut yourself.”

Beatrice caught her breath, stilling her whole body as her hand was clenched inside his. She remembered how it felt when he had grabbed her in the carriage, pulled her into his arms. Then she slowly looked up. Giovanni was staring down at their entwined hands and his expression was impossible to read. She felt as if the ground was

shifting underneath them, threatening to disturb the whole landscape of their relationship. Would things ever be the same now? How could she put it in the past when she felt the way she did?

Beatrice swallowed hard.

“Gio—”

“There you are!”

They both started, their hands ripping away from one another as they whipped their heads around to the door. Anna stood there, smiling down on them both.

“Oh! Has there been an accident?” She asked, stepping into the room with Marion, the housekeeper, coming in too, carrying Caleb in her arms.

“Uh, yes,” Giovanni mumbled, standing up and holding the largest pieces of the cup in his hands. Beatrice stood beside him, sweeping her dress down and catching his dark green eyes for a moment before looking away. “I dropped my cup.”

“Let me take it, Amante,” Marion said, addressing Giovanni by his last name as most of the staff did. She set little Caleb on the ground. He was just at the stage of crawling, and Beatrice instantly stepped forward to sweep her nephew up into her arms, comforted by his soft scent and the warmth of his sweet head against her face. Her heart was racing from her contact with Giovanni and she could feel his tension even standing at a distance. She noticed the way he ruffled his newspaper and tried not to catch her eye. Marion took the pieces of crockery and left the room, bustling out and calling for a serving girl to come with a broom. Anna smiled at them both.

“Something arrived for you today, my dear,” Anna nodded as Marion came back in with a bouquet of white roses and a small card. “I presume they are from a suitor.”

“White roses, so lovely,” Marion said, handing them to Beatrice for her to admire.

“Yes, they are,” Beatrice said, sniffing in their floral scent. “And not as... obvious as red roses, don’t you think?”

She deliberately avoided looking at Giovanni, but out of the corner of her eye she watched him, checking to see if he had noticed her veiled reference to their conversation in the carriage. His hand stilled on the newspaper.

Was it enough to let him know that she did remember what happened? Would he want to talk with her, or would he continue to pretend?

“But red roses have their appeal, do they not?” Giovanni said, speaking quite heartily, and Beatrice felt a flicker of annoyance.

“Not to me,” she said, trying to sound light-hearted. “I like white roses better.”

“Oh, white or red, they are still beautiful! Open the card!” Anna laughed.

Beatrice thought she saw Giovanni frown, but then in a moment he was beside her once again. She wondered if he was going to whisper something to her but he just held out his arms for Caleb.

“Let me take him,” he said. “So you can read your card.”

“Oh, of course.” She handed her nephew over to him, watching as Giovanni’s face split into the engaging grin that she found so appealing as he took the child in his arms. The little boy giggled and laughed as Giovanni poked his nose familiarly.

“Beatrice?” Anna looked at her curiously, waiting for her to read her card.

“Oh!” Beatrice opened it, flustered at being caught looking at Giovanni so intently. “It - it is from Lord Milton.”

“Wonderful!” Anna clapped her hands happily. “Didn’t I say he would be taken with you? Oh, what does he say?”

“Um, very little,” Beatrice said, uncomfortable to be reading the note in front of Giovanni, but forcing herself to behave normally. “He says that he hopes the flowers shall match another of my gowns, and that he looks forward to calling on me this week.”

“Oh, my,” Anna whispered, reaching out to squeeze Beatrice’s arm. “This is such wonderful news! You have had so many admirers, my dear, but this is a wonderful step. Your brother and I are so proud of you. You shall be married within the year, I am sure of it. Just think of it!”

“Excuse me,” Giovanni mumbled as he moved towards the door, coughing loudly. “I shall take Caleb outside.”

Beatrice didn’t look up as he left, fixing her eyes on the creamy blooms. She wondered if he was leaving because he was uncomfortable with all the talk of suitors after their angry discussion two nights before, or if he was uncomfortable with talking about her potential wedding when the intimacies they had shared together were so close in memory.

Or perhaps he cared not either way.

She focused on the soft scent of the roses and tried to forget about his touch.

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About the Author

Lisa Campell is an American author specialising in Steamy Regency romance tales. She decided to realise her lifelong dream of becoming a writer at a relatively mature age, after an inciting event taught her that it's better late than never. Transferring the intricate storylines of her boundless imagination to ink and paper has been her passion ever since.

Her historical fiction novels have been distinguished for their intriguing plots, their well-situated characters and the attention to detail level they display.

Lisa lives in Santa Clara, California, together with her dear husband. They are the parents of two children. Before devoting herself to Regency romance, Lisa split her time between being a mother and working as a travel clerk. She now finds her youthful spirit to be revitalised every time she brings one of her stories to life.



Note from Lisa

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